A MAKER OF SAINTS

HAMILTON DRUMMOND



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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

GREATER THAN THE GREATEST

THE BETRAYERS

E. P. DUTTON & COMPANY

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BY

HAMILTON DRUMMOND

AUTHOR OF "GREATER THAN THE GREATEST," "THE BETRAYERS," ETC.



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A MAKER OF SAINTS

NOTE TO "PURGATORIO" CANTO XIV. 112

LONGFELLOW'S TRANSLATION

"There was a stone column in the middle of the town, upon which were rings or knockers, as if all the front doors were there represented. To this, as soon as a stranger made his appearance, he was conducted, and thus, as chance decreed, he was taken to the house of the gentleman to whom the ring belonged, and honoured according to his rank. This column and its rings were invented to remove all cause of quarrel."

A MAKER OF SAINTS

CHAPTER I

A SAINT IN THE MAKING

"Turn slowly," said the Master. "Slower—slower yet. There! Turn as you turn now, 'Sandro, but cease when I raise my hand."

Stepping aside, so that the clear, unvarying undeceiving north light might fall unshadowed on the marble, Fieravanti stood silent, his eyes intently watchful, while 'Sandro pressed the lever which turned the wooden block on whose four-square firmness the statue rested. 'Sandro was the famous sculptor's *scarpellino* or "chisel-man," part pupil, part skilled artisan and whole-hearted worshipper of the genius whose fame filled Romagna and was spreading even to Rome itself.

In the background, almost breathless with suspense as the critical inspection ran its slow course, English Anthony, 'Sandro's fellow-pupil and co-worshipper, waited for the verdict. Together they had seen the shapeless mass of wet clay take form as by a new creation, together had hewn the marble block to some faint grotesque suggestion of its final life-likeness, together had watched grace and beauty grow out of chaos under the Master's hammer and chisel; to their enthusiasm the Magdalene was perfect.

But, as is the way of all artists who are truly great,

Marco Fieravanti was known to be his own sternest critic. Some flaw hidden from their inexperience, some failure to grip the great conception and fix it in the marble, some subtle unrealised imagination whose very existence was hidden from their duller souls might vex his high ideals. In which case—but there was no forecasting what the artist in Marco Fieravanti might or might not do in such a case. A hammer had been known to end in three minutes as many months' labour; therefore, bating their breath, they hung upon the verdict, shivering inwardly.

Now, his brows drawn, his eyes narrowed, his mouth compressed to a scarlet thread scarcely visible between the fine hair of the upper lip and the beginnings of the short, curly beard which hid the squareness of his firm chin, he followed intently the slow revolution of the marble, motioning with his hand from time to time, and from time to time curtly bidding 'Sandro, "turn on": nor did his serious, bent expression greatly vary.

Twice his pause quickened the suspense, so long-drawn was the keen and searching examination: once when the shifting of the turn-table brought the upturned face into profile, and once again as the eyes of statue and sculptor, creation and creator, met. But there was no glooming of the shadow in the intent gaze, almost, rather, a relaxing of the compressed lips as, at a motion from the hand, the circle moved on to its completion.

The statue was a commission from the Bishop of Forli, Fieravanti's native town, and the first received from His Grandeur. At any moment the bishop, notified of its readiness, might arrive to inspect the completed work, and arrange for its placing in the Church of the Holy Penitents, amongst whom, naturally, the Magdalene held a foremost place. This, then, was in the nature of a final scrutiny, a setting, as it were, of the artist's spiritual sign-manual on his work, and, though he gave no sign,

Fieravanti told himself that it was good, quite as good as the Santa Agnese in the Duomo of Rimini which had brought him name and fame, drawing all Romagna and half northern Italy to the cathedral.

At the completion of the show circle he nodded his head with a great sigh of satisfaction. As good as the Santa Agnese? Surely better: at once his latest and his best. Even in the silence of his own thought Fieravanti did not say "his greatest." Modest, as all true artists should be but are not always, he claimed no greatness for his work: greatness belonged to the unattained beauty of the Greeks, living, strong, virile.

"Good lads, both," he said, glancing from 'Sandro to the big-built Englishman in the background. "From the very first you caught my idea, and to be understood is itself an inspiration; it puts heart into a man's work. His Grandeur may come when he pleases, and, by the noise in the street it pleases him to come now; run, 'Sandro, and see."

Fieravanti was right. Forli, full-blooded in its loves and its hates from the day the Romans knew it as Forum Livii, did nothing by halves. Out in the narrow street it was roaring itself hoarse in honour of the bishop it loved, shouting its "vivas" with a whole-hearted vigour which would only have been equalled by its tearing up of the cobbles to pelt the litter of the bishop it hated.

But Fieravanti heard nothing of the din, heard nothing of the swelling tumult as the litter was halted at the door of Forli's yet greater idol—himself, nothing of the feet in the passage-way and workshop. He had caught the lever, 'Tonio standing aside, and was sending the marble once more upon its slow revolution, his every sense absorbed in a recurrent study of his handiwork.

It is the faculty of sympathy and comprehension in a man which wins him the love of his fellows. The man of

strong soul men will follow, the man of high birth they may obey through custom, but the man of sympathetic comprehension of his fellows men love. Sometimes we say of such a one, "He is very human," when, more truly, we mean that in him he has a touch of the divine: the human, unhappily, is not always sympathetic. It was this quality in Luca Melone which had compelled the love of Forli; now its characteristic flashed out. 'Sandro, who led the way would have called to the Master, breaking in on his absorption, but His Grandeur silenced him with a hand on the arm and all three stood at gaze.

Fieravanti, though in the world, was, for the time, not of it. The four walls of his workshop had crumbled; he and his marble were alone, a universe of themselves, and to him, except for the marble, the world was not. One hand held the lever, the other hung loosely by his side: an artist's hand, the fingers long, slender, delicate, flexible, sensitive to obey the subtlest inspiration of the creative mind, yet firm and muscular, strong as sinews strong as steel cords could make them.

Born in Forli yet not altogether of Forli, a mixture of races met in him. The temperament was southern, while the broad-templed, deep-browed head told of a northern strain. For the skin was fair under its tan, the short beard a russet brown, the thick hair, falling to the shoulders after the custom of the times, a yet deeper tint, warm with the warmth of a ripe chestnut new fallen from its burr. For the rest, not even the loose gaberdine-like smock of white linen, girded at the waist, could altogether spoil the fine proportions of his tall figure—a man whom women followed with their eyes for the beauty of his face, but envied by men for his upright carriage, supple strength and breadth of shoulder; this last the gift of his peasant forbears: Marco Fieravanti though born in

Forli was of the soil and peasant bred—which, it may be, was one reason why Forli loved him: he was their very blood.

It was the little hacking cough which troubled Luca Melone at times that roused the sculptor. But even then he had no apologies ready. Ignorant of will to offend where was there cause for offence? Instead, and without even formal greeting, he went straight to the purpose of the bishop's presence in the workshop.

"Stand here, Your Grandeur, where there is no shadow."

"Ah!" said Melone, his kind old eyes smiling whimsically, "that is a rare thing in life—the light without a shadow. Happy is the man who finds it! When last I saw your statue, Ser Fieravanti, it was beauty struggling into life, now——"

"Wait," said Fieravanti, his hand upon the lever, "wait until you have seen all."

The bishop nodded, still smiling, but as the Magdalene made her slow revolution the hint of humour playing round the gentle, sensitive mouth, faded into gravity. An honest man, he knew his own limitations and how to criticise a saint of Marco Fieravanti's carving perplexed him. Of art he only knew that at times his soul kindled within him, responsive, at times was revolted and at times left cold by what stirred others to admiration. Beauty, he readily admitted, might be present in all these; but analysis was beyond him, nor could he have said why his soul was stirred or why left untouched. He knew when he liked a statue or a picture but not why, and since this Magdalene of Fieravanti's left him cold how was he to do it justice without lying to himself? Praise whole-heartedly he could not. And yet, in a work of Fieravanti's carving the fault must lie in himself, in his own inability to

understand, not in the failure of the finished marble.

But that suggested a straw of doubt and in his perplexity he caught at it.

"Um-m-m," he murmured, nodding his head. "Beautiful—most beautiful. The Magdalene's very pose without a doubt. But is it finished?"

"You do not like it?" It was an essential of Fieravanti's art that he should read faces, seeing not just features, not just lines of age or curves of beauty, but the subtle hidden spirit which flames in all men behind the veil of flesh! How else could his marbles live? Now this sixth sense, acutely perceptive, read embarrassment in His Grandeur's clouded eyes.

"Like it?" Melone spoke abstractedly, his eyes narrowed, his brows drawn, his lower lip pushed out in perplexed thought. "The Magdalene? Yes, certainly the Magdalene, the woman who has sinned and sorrowed to the edge of heart-break, but—but—oh, beautiful without doubt. The pose is perfect: a breaking away from convention, perhaps, but life itself. When shall I bid them make ready for it in the church?"

But Fieravanti gave no answer. There were some who complained that at times he forgot his place, forgot that he was a man of the people, a mere hewer of stone to the greater glory of God with the Church as chief patron; others said he knew there were many bishops but only one Marco Fieravanti. Both were wrong. Like all true artists he was an humble man before his art, since interpretation must always lead upward to the infinite, but when some points in that interpretation perplexed him, some vital expression within his powers and yet evading his grasp, as, clearly, it had evaded him thus far, he forgot everything but the difficulty, and would have let Pope Clement himself stand by unanswered while he groped for the solution.

And his perplexity was this—What was it in his Magdalene which failed to please? The model had been approved; through the slow growth of the statue from the rough block of Carrara marble to this, his latest masterpiece of beauty, he had found his patron a kindly, simple-hearted gentleman; unpretentious, uncritical, always delighting in each new revelation of the gradual development. Critical? Even now he was not critical, but, quite clearly, neither was he content in his heart. Why? That touched the sculptor's pride in more than his art. It was his foible to please his patrons even when they did not know why they were pleased. Surely it is the supreme greatness of a Master that he can awaken perceptions which have hitherto lain dormant? With Luca Melone there was no such awakening: plainly, the marble left him cold. Why?

Still silent, Fieravanti pushed the lever once more as 'Sandro had pushed it, turning the block slowly, so that again each curve and outline came under the searching power of the strong light. And he found it all good. Good as the Santa Agnese of Rimini? Better, because more human. That was natural. The beauty of the Magdalene was the beauty of this world; in the Agnese he had striven to catch some foretaste of the beauty of the world to come, a thing to baffle imagination since no man knows wherein lies that beauty. Where, then, was the failure? The pose? Certainly in his conception he had, as Melone had noted, broken away from convention, but twice over His Grandeur had praised the pose: where, then, was the failure?

The figure was half seated, half, as it were, flung on the ground, represented by a broad oval of roughened marble, flung in a crouched abandon of self-abasement, as if the conviction of sin had come with a Pauline swiftness. The thinnest veil of drapery the Church would

permit suggested rather than covered the gracious charm of her splendid womanhood: the feet, protruding beyond, were nude marvels of delicate modelling; advanced a little, just below the level of the breast, the hands were clasped, the right above the left. Being a figure partly recumbent the head was tilted back, the lovely face raised to heaven, the delicate, sensitive lips half parted in the imploration of a sudden and crushing penitence. No, Fieravanti, his own most stern and grudging critic, could see no fault.

Yet, clearly, His Grandeur, looking down into the flawless face, his brows puckered, his lower lip pushed out, was not entirely content. Then the sculptor remembered the question he had fenced, and answered it, but so as to gain time and not as he would have replied an hour before.

"Finished, did Your Grandeur ask? No, not quite—a touch here, a touch there."

"Ah, so I thought!" The pucker disappeared. In a mingling of relief and frank kindliness he laid a familiar hand on the sculptor's shoulder, pressing it. A condescension from the purple of the prelate to the smock of the maker of saints? Yes, but, to his credit, the bishop never forgot that he had risen from the people. "So I thought," he repeated. "It is always the soul that is born last, and in Mary it was a soul that loved greatly. It is a great gift yours, my son; to put a soul into stone and thereby lift men's thoughts to heaven. Would that we poor priests could always do the like, rousing the soul in the flesh! And when will the miracle be finished?"

"I must have time, Your Grandeur. To-morrow I go to Arzano——"

"Take time" said the bishop heartily, adding, in the homely sense of his peasant birth, "Better a month's delay than a botched job. To Arzano? A commission for

the Duke, no doubt." Suddenly his eyes twinkled as at some humourous thought. "Arzano? That is a three-days journey with a choice of roads. Ser Fieravanti, I recommend you to go by way of Brettinoro and pass the night there."

"There is a good inn?"

His Grandeur shook his head, still smiling. He was a tall, lean, loose-jointed man with angular projecting cheek-bones, but his smile was most winningly soft and kindly.

"There is much better than that, there is a welcome no payment can force nor money purchase. Have you never heard of The Custom? Set up in the centre of Brettinoro's one street—it is a straggle of a village, nothing more—you will find a broad-faced stone pillar with a score or two of metal rings so let into it that they hang loosely, knocker fashion. Each ring is an open door for the traveller: make your selection, then knock boldly and your welcome is sure."

"I am stupid: how can a stone pillar be an open door?"

"It is I who tell my story badly. And it is a pretty story, I know no other like it in Italy—nor in all the world! An inn? There never has been an inn in Brettinoro; but of old the good people living there so laid to heart the text, *Hospitales invicem sine murmuratione.* Show hospitality without grudging, that nightly they came to blows in their eagerness to obey the Apostolic injunction and secure the privilege of entertaining the wayfarer."

"Mostly," said Fieravanti, "it is the host who bleeds the guest, but in Brettinoro it seems it was the host who bled for the guest's sake!"

"And at times the guest also! Drawn into the vortex of the struggle to secure him the traveller, not once nor twice, but many times, had in the end more need of a surgeon than a cook! To put an end to such a scandal

The Custom was established. The stone pillar was set up in the village street and whoever so willed fixed a ring to its front. Picking a ring at hazard the traveller made his choice, knocked on the stone and knocking opened a door of welcome—quarrels were at an end."

"But," objected Fieravanti, "there are such things as armorial devices——"

"None are allowed, the rings are all of a pattern."

"And every night twenty or thirty or forty lackeys or men-at-arms stand round to see which ring——"

His Grandeur again interrupted. "No, no, no such waste. Nor do all the would-be hosts possess lackeys or men-at-arms. The poor as well as the rich are represented on that stone pillar. No: the urchins of Brettinoro know the rings as you your graving tools and act as guides. Nor dare they hint a choice. The roof-tree of the rash blabber would go up in a fire that night. The traveller makes choice by chance. It may be butterless rye bread with a straw pallet to follow, or the supper of a prince and lawn sheets."

"Rye bread or a prince's supper? Why it's a lottery! Can Your Grandeur, with any conscience, commend such a cast of the dice?"

But the humour in His Grandeur's kindly eyes only broadened at the mock reproof.

"Worse than that, only let it not be breathed beyond your workshop! With a good conscience I shall load the dice for you, Ser Fieravanti! Knock with the fourth ring from the left in the third row from the top; Ascanio Faldora's door will open for you and your supper of a prince be sure; I have travelled that way and I know."

"Faldora of Pesaro?" It was part of Marco Fieravanti's trade to know not only the great names of Romagna but also something of their history.

"Faldora of Pesaro," repeated the bishop. "That you

will sup like a prince will be the least of your entertainment. God send Romagna many Ascanio Faldoras—a Grand Seigneur and a most perfect gentleman. Romagna? All Italy has need of his breed. Age has neither bent his back nor cooled his fire. That he has all the pride of all the Faldoreschi from the days of Adam—it is his belief that our first father was a Faldora—is the one weakness of a splendid nature—and, yes, perhaps there is a flaw of temper when his mood is crossed, a hastiness, a heat which flashes out to scorch what lies nearest; perhaps, too, a sourness which surges up for a shamed instant. But even I, who come from below—as a boy I starved at times and at times I lived on a begged crust, Ser Fieravanti, and am none the worse since it taught me the needs and sorrows of the poor—even I, who can have none to follow me, understand why he is soured."

"Soured?" repeated Fieravanti, who had grown interested as he listened, "full of years, honoured in his age, rich, secure, a Faldora of Pesaro——"

"And the last of his line—a line which has fallen from its ancient greatness but is still great."

"But there are collaterals of his name; I have heard men speak of a younger generation."

"And if your Magdalene were broken to pieces before your eyes," the bishop touched the marble as he spoke, "would it comfort you that another hand might carve something smaller from the fragments and say, 'This was once Fieravanti's'?"

"Then Faldora is childless?"

"No, there is a grand-daughter." Turning from the statue Luca Melone laid a hand lightly on the sculptor's shoulder. "There is a subject for your chisel, Ser Fieravanti. Make a saint of Lucia Faldora."

"Saints are of God's making, not mine, Your Grandeur."

"Yet men call you The Maker of Saints."

"In stone, yes."

"Well, make a saint in stone of Lucia Faldora."

"Is she so beautiful?"

"Must one be beautiful to be a saint? But you are right, she is as beautiful as your Magdalene, and not unlike, no, now I think of it, not unlike."

"And wherein is the likeness?"

"Um—no!" Melone shook his head. "I shall say no more than—it is there!"

"Your Grandeur tempts me——"

"Not I, but the artist in you. Go to Arzano by way of Brettinoro and judge for yourself. Then, when you have put a soul into my Magdalene send for me again. Of all women in the world Mary of Magdala has most need of a beautiful and sweet soul, since it was the body which dragged her down. Remember, the fourth ring from the left in the third row from the top!"

"And is she saint-like, this Lucia Faldora?"

Again Melone laid a finger on the statue. "What was your marble before your chisel wrought its magic? Pure and cold, ignorant of the great purpose for which God made it: there's your answer! Test The Custom, my friend, test The Custom," and with a smiling nod His Grandeur turned to the door.

But when Fieravanti returned from aiding the bishop into his litter he stood long silent before the work of his hands, alternately pressing and drawing the lever with slow force so that the face of the Magdalene shifted from side to side in the clear light. And in the background 'Sandro and Anthony Hawk waited in anxious expectation. Apart from respect their dumbness was the dumbness of dogs whose affectionate sympathy is stirred but which cannot understand. For His Grandeur as Bishop of Forli they had great reverence, for His Grandeur as Art critic no reverence at all; and, indeed, he had at-

tempted no criticism. It was just that he did not approve. Why?

That was what troubled Fieravanti. Luca Melone was of the people, Luca Melone stood for the people, for the tens of thousands who through following generations would stand before his Magdalene and be stirred to the soul, or left cold as they judged his handiwork. In the end it is the judgment of the people that counts: why had Luca Melone not approved? Soul? Twice he had spoken of soul: surely, in sculpture beauty was soul and none could deny the beauty. Most cordially Melone had admitted the beauty; yet he had not approved.

With a gesture of vexed impatience the maker of saints beckoned to the silent *scarpellini*. "Cover her from the dust with a sheet," he said curtly. "A soul? Where am I to find a soul to please His Grandeur? 'Tonio, see that the horses are ready by seven to-morrow morning. We sleep at Castel-Cavo; for our next night's rest we will test this Custom of Brettinoro. While we are gone do you, 'Sandro, shape out the lions for the pulpit in Sant' Agostino. Soul? The less a man plays with souls the better, and least of all with the soul of a woman!"

"And to-night?" hinted the Englishman.

Fieravanti laughed. "I may find Magdalenes enough at the Castello but no soul for my saint."

"It was the body I meant, and the flesh at that," said blunt Anthony bluntly. "The streets are not safe o'nights."

But the maker of saints only shook his head: "Keep your cudgel for the roads to-morrow. God be praised for friends! In all Forli, yes and in all Romagna, there is no man wishes me ill."

CHAPTER II

SINNERS MADE

THERE are two primitive ways by which a strong man may rule turbulent folk—he may either win their affection, win their willing service; or he may set his heel upon their liberties and grind resistance into the dust. Indeed, when all's said, whether the method be primitive or subtle all systems are, in the end, variants of these two.

With Girolamo Ordelaffi it was a blending of the two devices, love and fear. To him the latter came more naturally, and in his heart he placed his fullest reliance on the thick-walled, be-towered, be-machiolated Castello whose frowning menace warned Forli to obedience. In the worst event it would stand a siege long enough to allow aid to come from Imola, Faenza or Rimini; not that the Alidosi, the Manfredi, or the Malatestas loved Girolamo; but sooner or later each might have need of a like assistance, and in any case dog does not eat dog, nor hawk pick out a hawk's een.

But that he might not be pushed to that extremity Ordelaffi prudently cultivated that exotic plant, conciliation, and to that end paid court to the maker of saints, beloved of Forli. Art did not stir his blood by one heartbeat; the languorous allure of a Capuan Venus he could understand and appreciate, but these aloof saints of Fieravanti left him frigid. But if the common folk went on their knees to the cold marble, and because of the marble shouted themselves hoarse for the son of Forli who shaped the dull whiteness, why then he would use him to his own

gain and catch two fish on the one hook, a reputation as an art patron and the goodwill of the people; wherefore Marco Fieravanti was bidden to the Castello's at times doubtful revelries and, outwardly at least, made welcome.

And Fieravanti? What magnet drew his clean steel to such a mingling of tinsel and dross as Girolamo Ordelaffi loved? Certainly it was not to curry favour with the great, nor feed his vanity by rubbing shoulders with despisers of his humbler origin. To wealth, race and greatness he gave no more thought than he had given to the coming of Luca Melone. But charm and grace, beauty of curve and outline, whether of saint or sinner, were the open books from whose pages he drew his inspiration, and these he studied as keenly in the warm and scented air of the Castello as in the wind-blown, open spaces of the market-place.

And there is also this, less obvious, more subtle, but not less true—the open book of the Castello taught him by opposites. For his art, curves and lines of beauty were not enough: needs must that he see nature stripped as bare as naked flesh. From the play of hot passions suddenly flashed out from luring eyes, from the coarse triumph of the successful gamester, from the uncurbed anger, despair at times, of the beggared loser, from a score of revelations in human nature sinking to its depths, he learned how heights are climbed and how beauty may be as pure as it is lovely. Nor did these revelations offend him. Marco Fieravanti was no ascetic, no austere anchorite. Not his to censure a yielding to temptations which for him had no lure. He took men and women as he found them, used what he found good for his art and let the rest slip past.

That night was as many others. Always Anthony Hawk, sturdier and stronger muscled than the slighter built smaller boned Italian, 'Sandro, had hinted at at-

tendance as body-guard through the darkness of the narrow streets; and always, as upon this night, Fieravanti had answered that there was none in Forli who wished him ill. Thieves? It was a strange commentary on the hot-blooded turbulent folk over whom Girolamo Ordelaffi ruled with a watchful fear which never wholly lifted, but in the most lawless, poverty-ridden rookery of a poor and lawless city Marco Fieravanti had but to cry his name to pass unscathed in pouch or person.

So now, though the March night had settled darkly on Forli when he set out for the Castello, he gave, and rightly, no thought to a risk which not five men in the city dared have ventured with impunity. Dark? It was black dark: that grey hour which the peasant folk call the hour between dog and wolf had long passed and in Forli's twisting, narrow streets, the pent-roofed houses with their eaves almost touching across the pooled and rutted cobble ways, the gloom thickened to that primal darkness which might be felt.

And yet, through the winter nights that had always been a walk which Fieravanti loved. It was at such times that, brooding on those curves and lines, passions and despairs, inspiration broke upon him. In Forli men closed their doors with the fall of dusk, windows were few and fast shuttered for good cause; light there was none, nor, except rarely, so much as a footfall to bring near the common things of life. Solitary, unafraid, knowing every inch of the way, he could unleash his imagination and set it coursing through those recesses of the mind where unborn conceptions waited an awakening.

It had been in the solitary quiet of the darkness, with the early winter's wind cold on his face, that the pose suggestive of the true spirit of the Magdalene, an abasement of penitence which still looks up in faith, had

flashed upon him; now, through a natural connection, his thoughts turned once again upon Luca Melone's dissatisfaction. Dissatisfaction? No, that was too strong a word; perhaps a want of appreciation, a lack of comprehension, better described His Grandeur's attitude.

Why? As a blind man's perceptive fingertips search out meanings blank to his darkened sight, so Marco Fieravanti's sensitive memory searched curve and outline for an answer, searched and searched, forgetting rough cobbles and blackness of darkness in his absorption. But search and grope as he might he found none. Always, as if travelling in a circle, he came back to Melone's phrase, the soul is born last.

What did he mean? In the very self-abandonment of the figure there was both prayer and penitence: what more was looked for in a Mary Magdalene? And yet—and yet—there must be a something lacking, a something the bishop looked to find and missed. Perhaps, thought Fieravanti with unaccustomed cynicism, he would find it by opposites in the Castello that night; and with that he was at the gates.

Though Frederick, the great Emperor, was dead these sixty-five years the fashion of luxury he had set lived after him. But what, in Frederick's great Court, the greatest and most splendid of the time, had been an eager love of the beautiful for beauty's sake, in Ordelaffi's petty circle degenerated into a ministering to the sensual and a gross love of voluptuous display. Shining silks hid the rude roughness of the thick walls in tawdry imitation of Flemish and Bayeux tapestries; the scores of lamps were no longer patterned after the graceful beauty of ancient Greek models but flared their light garishly through many coloured glass; aromatic gums and perfumed woods smouldered incense as of old, scenting the

warm air, but the severe loveliness of pure, cool marble no longer rested eyes wearied by the riot of colour.

And as the setting of the stage so were the players. Frederick, himself a sensualist, had kept the clean fame of his great Court above reproach; with Girolamo Ordelaffi licence peeped leering through half opened doors, and the rattle of the dice-box was the music he loved best. Forli paid for all, and in the guardrooms of the Castello, in steel by night and day and with blades loose in sheath, there never failed those who saw to it that, good grace or bad grace, in the end Forli paid.

The night's gaiety was in full flood, a babbling stream not deep but noisy, when Fieravanti passed from the grim strength of the guarded passage ways to the glare and tinsel of Forli's petty Court. He was a late comer and the room, of no great size, was already crowded, the air vibrant with the blent music of many sounds—the chime of women's laughter, men's rougher voices decorously subdued, the clang of a steel sword sheath on the paved floor, the soft rasp of moving feet, the whispering rustle of trailing gowns, the twinkle of crystal as pages in Ordelaffi's gay liveries of blue and crimson moved here and there with brass trays of flasks and wine cups.

It has been said that the sculptor was a man whom women turned to look at twice, and now it was a woman who first saw him as he stood, solitary, watching the interweaving play of many colours. Instantly she linked an over-familiar but well-accustomed hand with Ordelaffi's arm.

"There, standing alone by the door, who is that?"

"That?" Ordelaffi shook his head as, laughing, he looked down upon her. "That is our Phidias, our peasant Praxiteles,"

"A sculptor? And if I posed for him would you be very jealous, my Girolamo?"

But Ordelaffi only laughed again, laughed tolerantly yet with a touch of malice in the laugh.

"You pose for him! You forget, Bellissima; the man is a maker of saints, while you—but now I think of it, his latest miracle would fit you as this glove your hand! And yet, no! The Magdalene was penitent, whereas you —you catch my meaning?"

"Penitent? Perhaps someday I shall be—if I live long enough. For to-night life's life; would you be jealous?"

"Leave him alone," answered Ordelaffi shortly, and this time it was Amata Capponi who laughed. "Through a woman mischief came into the world and still it is women who make it. "

"Tell me," she persisted, her hold on his arm tightening: "If I were to pose for him, what would you do?"

"Tell me," he retorted still unsmiling, "how would you pose?"

From Ordelaffi her gaze travelled back to Fieravanti, upright and striking in his sober greys as he leaned against the gay silken hangings.

"A peasant? Peasant he may be, but he is the finest man in the room and the handsomest. How would I pose? Piff! A woman's a woman and not a bundle of silks and lawns! What an Adam he would make if I were Eve!"

"You would dare? You would dare?" Ordelaffi's voice roughened harshly as, scowling down upon her, he stiffened. "What would I do? Double my guards and make an end of——"

"Phidias!" she cut in, showing her white teeth.

"You both," he ended, as if she had never interrupted, and again their eyes met.

But though the threat in his was naked and sinister, as easily to be read and more forcible than in the words, the woman neither shrank nor quailed. Partly it was her

smooth and rounded beauty which held him, but partly also her audacious courage: that it was audacious she gave him instant proof.

"Bring him to me," she commanded. "Yesterday you called me a greedy kite because of this gold chain round my neck: well, kite or no kite for once I'll fly at an eagle, I am tired of parrot-sport. Oh, not you, my king; there are others who chatter round me like daws and sparrows."

"How can parrots be daws and sparrows?" he gibed, but there was no relaxing of the sternly set mouth.

"How can a woman be aught else than a woman?" she gibed back. "As for these others, they are whatever I choose to call them! Now fetch this Phidias. What is his name?"

"Fieravanti." His hand closed over hers a moment and its pressure crushed the slim fingers till the bones ached. "Remember, I hold to my word; though if ill befell their maker of saints I would have all Forli in arms."

"To-night life's life," she repeated, smiling up unafraid through narrowed lids. "Fieravanti? I have heard of him, though his saints are not mine! Fetch him." And Girolamo Ordelaffi went.

A man of his times, measuring all things, whether men's lives, a city's liberties or a woman's honour, by the standard of his own pleasure or advantage, Ordelaffi was yet no bully. Wheresoever he saw his way to advance his foot he there advanced it, careless whom it crushed, but bluster was foreign to his nature. So it was a courteous host, condescending possibly, being Ordelaffi of Forli, but still the host, who greeted Fieravanti.

"You are late, Messire? If it was that you might dream another saint into life you are forgiven."

"Am I late? I did not know it." The obvious frank sincerity robbed the words of their seeming discourteous

indifference. "And the loss is mine. Where in all Romagna could I, who love beauty for beauty's sake, see such charm?"

"For its own sake?" repeated Ordelaffi. "But why else does any man love beauty?"

Fieravanti laughed. "There are loves and loves, Lord Girolamo, as there is beauty and beauty."

"Then come and be made glad, Ser Fieravanti. Signora Capponi has sent me to fetch you; only," and the lines at the corners of Ordelaffi's mouth deepened an instant, "remember your own saying, there are loves and loves. Come."

If, as Amata Capponi had said, Fieravanti was the finest man in the room Girolamo Ordelaffi ran him close. His forty years of life sat lightly on his broad shoulders, nor were the wrinkles netting his temples graven deeper than a thin cobwebbing: even then they were due less to the passage of time than to taking much thought for his life. Certainly, as side by side they crossed the floor, there were no two who could compare with them. But the sculptor's advantage of ten years could not altogether be hidden; if the elder was still in his prime it was a prime which was passing, while that of the younger, who, though no ascetic yet lived ascetically, was yet to come. Always, too, there was this—sooner or later a man's habit of thought writes itself on his face, and there, even in the eyes of such a woman who awaited them, Ordelaffi suffered. Those who love to share the cakes and ale, with the ginger hot in the mouth, are still quick to see the effects—in others!

Amata Capponi was still alone where Ordelaffi had left her; that he would return was as understood as that an intrusion would be resented. Therefore the ebb and flow passed her by, leaving her the centre of the hollow circle custom set apart for the lordling of the petty Court, until

such time as he chose to mingle familiarly with his guests. That curious eyes watched, and tongues stabbed, stung and rent, were things of course. For the latter, the tongues with all their poison, she cared nothing so long as there was no need to fear the first: that as yet the need to fear had not arisen the polished silver of her mirror told her, but in Fieravanti she looked for a still more triumphant proof.

While yet two paces distant Ordelaffi spoke, nor would any have guessed how carefully he chose his words:

"Sweetheart, be kind to Ser Fieravanti for Forli's sake."

But Fieravanti, smiling, put out a hand in protest, "No, Signora! Better be unkind for my peace sake."

"That is pretty, but," and she dropped a little mocking courtsey to Ordelaffi, "we must all obey my lord! Tell me how best I can be kind? Is there any of me you would have for your art?"

But in his art the sculptor was single-minded and no courtier. Always the unknown something lacking in his Magdalene, that missing window of Aladdin's palace, haunted him, and in Amata Capponi, smiling and provocative, he found no revelation, no, not even by opposites. Beauty? It was no mere want of beauty which had made Luca Meloné push out a doubtful lip.

"My lord would wish, perhaps, a bust, a head——"

But her height drawn to its full, her arms extended and curving forward, she interrupted him sharply.

"A bust? A head? More than busts and heads go to your making of saints, Ser Fieravanti."

"True!" said Ordelaffi, and added drily, "Something of saintship, perhaps. What did I tell you, Bellissima? You are not of the spirit for Fieravanti's Magdalene."

"Oh, the spirit! the spirit!" she scoffed. "Where is the woman who cannot make pretence of the spirit and

play the penitent when she chooses?" Whereat Ordelaffi laughed, but Fieravanti, unsmiling, answered:

"Pretences will not serve, Signora. If our marble is to live we must look through pretences, look to realities, look even to the very——"

"Soul!" she gibed vexedly and at the gibe Fieravanti started. It was Luca Melone's word.

"If there are souls in question then keep you away from Fieravanti's workshop," said Ordelaffi. "He works in white marble, sweetheart, not in mottled!"

"Mottled? No! Red-veined: blood red if you like!" she retorted. "I am no milk-saint, nor ever could be one. If there is fire at the heart it will out. God keep the man from the woman who is all ice. Saintship? There is little of that in the Castello, I think! Hark, Girolamo! Listen to your saints in the gaming-room yonder. They are at their orisons early to-night: mostly there is no quarrelling until they have well drunk!"

From either end of the main hall a smaller room opened, hangings half looped back partly masking the doors. From one of these there came from time to time the sound of music, the tinkle of dulcimers, citoles, trigons, with the fuller, stronger, more piercing note of the flute. Through the other door men passed quietly and only those nearest caught the sole sounds within, subdued voices, the rattle of dice in their boxes and the faint, sharp click of the ivory on the marble tables.

But suddenly the quiet had broken up in storm. From beyond the door there rose an excited babel of tongues, with two or three voices raised sharply above the general confusion. At once there was an instant's panic in the interweaving movement of life flowing in cross currents throughout the hall, then a surge, men chiefly, towards the door of the gaming room, a disordered tumult met at the threshold by a battling rush fighting to find exit.

These meeting jostled in confusion, then through the confusion there pushed a struggling fray lost to all sense of respect or even decorum.

For naked swords were flashing in the lamplight and only the packed congestion, hindering free use, held them back from being reddened. But once in the larger room the meeting throngs clustered to a rough circle, framing an inner group of three or four where heat must have flared up in deadly insolence had not an official in authority pushed in between. Not even then did the tumult die, but it was rather a clamour of angry tongues, a swift give and take of charge and countercharge, accusation and denial, than the threat of brute force.

"Bide here with the Signora," said Ordelaffi.

But even as he turned wrathfully across the floor the packed circle parted, leaving a narrow laneway open to the main entrance. Down this space one of the brawlers strode, not rapidly nor as by compulsion but like a man who ends a jarring scene by a way of his own choosing. At the door he halted, turning, and must have raised his tall height upon tiptoes, for Fieravanti caught a glimpse of a comely, defiant face distorted with passion as a clenched fist was shaken backwards overhead: then with a fling of the hangings he was gone. A moment later Ordelaffi returned.

"Dice cogging," he said curtly.

"Proven?" demanded Fieravanti.

"Here is Conti, he will tell us. Well? Have they broken the dice?"

"Loaded, Signor."

"Did I not say there was little saintship in the Castello?" cried Amata.

"Mottled marble!" retorted Ordelaffi. "You must look elsewhere for your white Carrara, Ser Fieravanti. Sweetheart, let us to supper and honest wine."

But when Amata Capponi would have brought him with them Fieravanti excused himself: needs must that he leave Forli early on the morrow for Arzano. At that Ordelaffi paused.

"Then if you go by way of Brettinoro, be advised and do not knock on old Faldora's door," he said sourly, and moved on.

CHAPTER III

THE AQUILA NERA

THOUGH day had broken, something of the gloom of night still lingered under Forli's outthrust pent-roofs when, next morning, Fieravanti and his English *scarpellino* mounted for their journey. North and east of the mountains it is still cold in March, and each, because of the biting air, was muffled to the throat in a heavy cloak whose skirts spread backward across the croup. A soft bonnet, with Fieravanti of velvet, fur bordered; with Anthony of Flemish cloth, pulled over the ears, completed the protection.

Each rode armed, but whereas the cloak hid the sculptor's sword and dagger the Englishman carried his four-foot cudgel slung full in view, a hinted warning for all to see. Of the two, sword or staff, the latter when wielded by such an arm as Anthony's might easily be the more effective if not the more deadly weapon.

Be sure 'Sandro was present to bid the Master God's speed. Bareheaded he stood in the cold while Fieravanti, a hand in his, bade him farewell.

"Rough out the Agostino lions, my son, and after that take holiday. How long shall we be gone? That depends on Varana, but I'll be no longer than I must. God keep you!" and with a friendly clap on the shoulder Fieravanti rode on.

"And you, Master," said 'Sandro, nor meant irrever-

ence when, catching the Englishman's bridle as he passed, he added, "Bring him safe home, or I'll have something to say to you."

"I'll have something to say to myself, or else not be here to say it," replied Hawk with a grim nod, and followed.

Through the ill-paved winding streets, with their twin line of ruts worn by generations of high-wheeled carts, and many pitfalls whose brimming mud hid holes deep enough to break a horse's leg, they rode in single file; not because they were master and servant, sculptor and *scarpellino,* but because there was not space to ride abreast in comfort. Except in the direct presence of others, such as Luca Melone, Fieravanti treated his workmen as friends, brethren of a common art who, any day, might surpass their master. So they ate together, worked together, rode together, on the one side with the frank friendliness of an acknowledged superior who fears no presumption, on the other with that affectionate respect which pays a deference only the more fully because it is not enforced: always, even at his friendliest, the Master was master.

Along the length of the tortuous streets, now growing crowded by a momentarily increasing throng—if Forli slept early Forli was no slugabed but went about its business betimes—progress was slow and so many were the greetings that Fieravanti's bonnet was more often in his hand than on his head: had Girolamo Ordelaffi been as certain of respect he might have halved his guards and slept easy. By the time the Cesena gate was reached day was broad.

But once beyond the walls a new world opened. Before them, straight as a stroke ruled upon paper, stretched the wide Emilian Way, that vital artery along which, in the mighty days of old, Rome's pulsing life-blood had poured in legions, cohorts and centuries to strengthen and

sustain the Republic's far-flung provinces. As it was when it left the hands of Æmilius Lepidus so it was under the hoofs of Fieravanti's horse and so it still remains, a tremendous and enduring monument to him whose name it bears.

As the highway broadened Fieravanti checked his horse that Anthony might join him. But even now no great speed was possible: if Forli woke early the folk beyond the walls woke yet earlier, and the dusty road, swept by a strong wind keenly cold from the mountains on the right, was almost as thronged as the narrow streets had been. But two, travelling slowly might ride abreast, and while they so rode they talked of their common interest, the workshop and its life—as two men of the one trade always do when they foregather, whether soldier, sailor or Jew chapman. The first brethren, it will be remembered, not having that bond, fell out by the way with evil consequences.

As was natural the thoughts of both were on the Magdalene and the visit of inspection paid the previous day.

"His Grandeur!" said 'Tonio in frank contempt, of the art critic, be it understood, not of the priest. "What can he know of women!"

"Much, else he is not fit for a priest and still less for a bishop, seeing that women are the Church, more shame to the men!"

The Englishman laughed. "He has the eye of a priest sure enough! He knew beauty when he saw it!"

"But not as you would know it; only for the sake of the soul which should be like it. 'Tonio, where——"

A jolt which almost flung him from the saddle, as Anthony Hawk's horse, plunging, drove against him heavily, cut short the question: on the further side there was the pad of galloping hoofs as a rider raced by, flinging

a curt "Out of my way, cattle," across his shoulder as he passed.

It was no more than a glance, but Fieravanti, quieting his startled horse, recognised the face; it was the Castello gamester.

With an oath in a tongue not often heard upon that ancient highway through its fifteen centuries the Englishman, recovering his shaken balance, spurred racing after, loosening his cudgel from its loop as he rode. But at Fieravanti's shouted command, a command urgent and insistent, he tightened rein; even in hot blood the Master was master.

"Would you tire your horse for a fool's gibe, and a day's journey ahead of you? though there's a better reason than that for not following. Do you know his face?"

"No," answered Hawk, and added, with grim intent, "I will next time I see it and he'll know I know it. What is the better reason, Signor?"

"That you would never catch him! You are the heavier by far and the worse mounted."

For an instant 'Tonio stared, then, being a cheery soul, he laughed till the tears came. "Twice a fool! But we'll meet sooner or later in this small world and I'll not forget his face."

Soon the Via Emilia was left behind. Turning sharply to the right, where the Ronco slips down its broad valley on its way to the sea at Ravenna, they skirted the vineyards, orchards and unhedged pastures bordering its banks. The road was of the roughest, always up and up with a steadily growing incline as they drew nearer to the heart of the mountains where lay their resting place for the night. Slowly, more clearly with every mile, the greater peaks grew upon them, hedging them about—Grande, Comero, Falterona, Tramiti, now hidden by the

nearer spurs as the valley narrowed, now flung towering against the blue of the March sky as some twist in the ever changing ascent, some branching defile cleaving its way to right or left, opened up vision.

Travellers were few, which was no loss: a gain rather: the fewer the better and none at all best of all in a land where man and nature were alike untamed. But that hamlets lay so far apart was worse than a vexation when 'Tonio's horse cast a shoe and three hours were lost hunting a smith: to ride shoeless over these stony roads was to ride lame.

Because of the delay dusk was already grey and falling rapidly to black dark when they halted at a wayside osteria where four roads met, to enquire their distance from Castel-Cavo. The host, weather-beaten and old before his time, answered as any man would answer at whose door custom seldom knocked.

"Castel-Cavo! Three hours by daylight, Signors, and the world's end by night: not even a dog could find the road in the dark."

"Three hours?" began Fieravanti, "surely not so far——"

"No, Signor, no: with the light gone it is half an hour at the most, but a broken neck to end the journey. Where might your lordships be bound for?"

"Brettinoro."

"Brettinoro?" he repeated briskly. "That settles it. Brettinoro is a short day's ride from Castel-Cavo and what you lose to-night you gain to-morrow; as well bide here as beyond. Matteo Vaga and the Aquila Nera have a reputation of their own, though I say it. But take your choice," and while he caught Fieravanti's bridle with one hand he waved the other up the uneven track already being lost in the gloom, "three hours of that, even if you have the luck to win through, or a fowl on the spit, good

sound wine and a soft bed to follow. Brettinoro? Leave betimes and you'll be hammering on their stone pillar an hour before sunset. What better can you do from Castel-Cavo? I mind me—aye, it was two years past, there were four went by on just such a night; bound for Brettinoro they were, too. Next morning there were three in the torrent and the fourth hunkering on the rocks, half crazed for fear he'd join them; but it's as you will, Signors, as you will."

With a shrug Fieravanti dismounted. That the distance and the danger were alike exaggerated he guessed, but with all allowance made enough of both remained to make a halt wisdom. Through the open door, cavern-dark, an unkempt, weasel-faced lad of twelve or fourteen was staring; to him the landlord, a man of action, turned even while he reached out for the second bridle.

"A lamp, quickly; tell the little mother, supper of the best for two and at once; then the lantern to the stables; stir, now, stir. Get you in and rest your bones, Signors; I'll see to the beasts; they'll fare of the best, as you will." He was loquacious but neither servile nor obsequious; something of a power in this lonely region, Fieravanti judged, a man held in deference by the scattered wood-cutters, charcoal burners and goatherds who drank that good sound wine of which he boasted, and by whom and upon whom the inn throve.

But with a day's rough journey yet to come, and another beyond that on to Arzano, the sculptor was too experienced a traveller to accept a glib tongue at its own valuation.

"Give him a hand, 'Tonio," he directed, and Hawk knew the meaning of the unspoken order was, See yourself to their feed and bedding.

A sliver of wood, lit at the fire burning in the wide hearth whose depth was sunk in the thickness of the wall, had set the lamp flaring and by its light Fieravanti saw

the little mother already busied over her preparations. Hearing his step on the earthen floor she turned, a hulk of a woman twice her husband's weight but still comely in a coarse fashion. A shrewd woman, too, he guessed, probably the grey mare of the proverb, her small, appraising eyes were so alert, so full of active speculation.

"Supper in an hour, Signor," she said, her voice rich with mellowness which must have been musical a generation earlier. "Draw the settle to the fire and warm yourself; you are late on the road for the time of year?"

"A horse cast a shoe," explained Fieravanti as he dragged the oaken bench forward.

Pausing in her work of piling faggots on the smouldering embers with their fine coating of white ash she glanced at him, "And but for the cast shoe, you would be in Castel-Cavo to-night? Then the saints are good to those who have most need! Where to, to-morrow, Signor?"

"Brettinoro. Is the road good?"

"One good and one bad," she answered, adding more wood to the now blazing heap. "The bad is the shorter, the good the quicker: you'll travel by it, I suppose?"

"Is the bad so very bad?"

"Bad? It's the devil of a road. See, it's like this." Seizing a long spit which served as poker she drew a curved line from one side of the hearth round in front of the piled faggots to the other, then across the roughly heaped wood itself. No words could have been more graphic; the one was smooth and level, the other a maze of rough hills and dipping valleys. "Oh, the devil of a road, all rock and pitfall and steep enough to break the heart of a mule."

"Boast of the mountains, but keep you to the valleys," quoted Fieravanti, laughing, "Thank you for your warning. We'll travel through the white ash, Mother."

"You'll be wise, Signor, you'll be wise—the very devil

of a road. Brettinoro? Aye, aye; you'll be in Brettinoro betimes, well before sunset. There! D'you feel the heat? Glory be! there's a fine blaze for roasting."

And within fifteen minutes the promised fowl, killed, prepared, its feathers rubbed off in a pail of scalding water, was turning from the jack fixed to the lintel of the great chimney-breast, not a capon perhaps but savoury and sufficient for two men's appetite; nor, when presently it came to be served, was the rough wine of two vintages past to be despised.

As for the soft bed to follow, it proved to be a huge sack-mattress stuffed with dry bracken, which the host dragged from a cupboard and stretched in front of the dying fire: with a coarse homespun blanket and their own cloaks as covering, tired men need ask little better. The household slept overhead, reaching their quarters by a ladder whose end rose through a square trap in the timbered ceiling, and with the sun but little more than two hours set there was not a sound except the sinking of the fire and the squeaking of mice in the corners.

But if Forli awoke with the sun the Aquila Nera roused while night was yet black. Fieravanti, restless through a blood-letting which was not to the profit of the inn, was fully roused while the darkness was still shadowless by a cautious stir overhead and the whispering of voices. There were no words, only changing incoherencies, but without doubt all three were awake; the treble of the lad, the hoarse roughness of the innkeeper and the little mother's rich mellowness were in turn to be distinguished, and of the three it was the woman who spoke most. Then came the shuffle of clumsy feet making the more noise for striving to keep quiet, and the tap, tap, of wooden-soled boots on the rungs of the ladder.

From the sound Fieravanti judged that the boy—Gian they called him—was descending, but so utterly dark was

the solid gloom that no movement was visible. With the last of the tapping the earthen floor was dumb, but laboured breath told of the effort to compel quietness: the oak beam closing the door gave little sound as it was swung upright, there was a rush of cold air, a glimpse of a sky heavy with clouds faintly washed by the grey dawn, and again the solid gloom of the black dark. Overhead the woman's voice whispered on, then ceased and for another hour there was quiet, but if they slept overhead Fieravanti, stretched by the warmth of the ashed-over embers, did not.

With the first clear paling of the gloom life awoke afresh, this time with such brisk frankness that 'Tonio had their bed rolled aside and the embers blown into a new day's fire before Vaga appeared.

Nor did the Aquila Nera disgrace its over-night's reputation. The eggs were fresh, the rye bread sweet and wholesome, the wine the sound rough wine of the past night's supper. At Castel-Cavo, Fieravanti told himself, they would have fared no better even for a more copious blood-letting: with the sun at eight they were ready to mount. And while Vaga made ready the horses the little mother talked, like the wise woman she was, of the day to come and the choice of roads to Brettinoro: clearly, in her confirmed opinion, the longest way round was the shortest way there.

"Gian?" queried Fieravanti in an interval of silence.

"Eh? Gian? Was your worship wakened?" Gian's mother, like the good hostess she was, looked troubled. "Gian has gone to seek a strayed goat; they are a plague, these villains of goats," and with that Vaga appeared in the wide open doorway which was the true window of the four-square room, kitchen, wine shop and living-room in one.

With the reckoning paid, and a hand still holding the

bridle as Fieravanti mounted, the innkeeper asked a question which had been burning his tongue all morning; not many travellers halted at the Aquila Nera for the night and gossip sold wine; men drank while they talked or listened.

"What name, Signor, if I may make so bold?"

"No great one to gild the feathers of your black eagle. Men call me Fieravanti."

"Marco Fieravanti of Forli," said 'Tonio and said it with emphasis, being jealous for the Master's reputation. If he had proclaimed His Magnificence, Can Grande della Scala of Verona, he would have said it with less assumption: there were many Can Grandes in the cockpit of Italy but God had made only one Marco Fieravanti.

"Fieravanti of Forli?" repeated Vaga, his eyes suddenly alert "Not—not——"

"Yes," said 'Tonio, pride in every curt syllable. "Fieravanti of Forli, just that."

"Fieravanti, the Maker of Saints?" The March wind blew cold at that hour these many feet above the sea, but Vaga bared his head in haste. "Why, in San Giovanni of Castel-Cavo we have——"

"Our Lady of Mercy, Fieravanti of Forli's carving," ended 'Tonio. "Just so."

Vaga shot a swift glance at the little mother as she stood listening from the hollow square of the open double doors. Her great bulk seemed greater to the eye than ever as the sunlight brought fully out the more than motherly depth of bosom and the rounded, fleshy muscles filling the stout homespun sleeves to a stretching of seams; but the broad, comely face was expressionless; quite plainly, Gian and the lost goat, or the roughness of the shorter devil of a road to Brettinoro was more to her than San Giovanni's Mother of Mercy.

"A good journey, Signor," she said placidly. "There is

no need to set them on the road, Matteo: a child could not miss it by day, and with Gian hunting that villain of a goat there's much to be done."

The hint was broad but Vaga's hand did not loosen the bridle. "Fieravanti of Forli? Fieravanti the carver of Our Lady?" he said almost like a man in a dream, or with his thoughts far away, possibly in the incense-sweetened air of the dim church: then, and suddenly, both voice and face changed: the hint of awe passed from his voice as he went on impressively, "Signor, that upper road——"

"A road for lost goats," said the little mother's mellow voice, breaking in. "If the Signor would founder his horse, or break its heart let him go by the upper road."

"Is the shorter by three leagues," he went on, unheeding. "Nowhere will you find such a sight of our mountains. If I were you, Signor——"

"Shorter by three leagues and longer by three hours," said the little mother, always placidly. "It is as I say: ask at Castel-Cavo if you will, Signors both. If you see Gian, bid him hasten back; there is much to be done, and the day passes."

"Nowhere in our mountains are there such sights; and it is less than three hours longer; less, Signor, less." Matteo Vaga was very persistent.

"More with a foundered horse; and every five minutes now is five minutes later at the other end," said the wise woman in the open doorway. "The Signors will have enough of the hills before they see Arzano, and you know it, Matteo. If you meet Gian with the goat, Signor, bid him hasten," and with a gesture of the hand holding the soiled bonnet, a gesture which might have meant despair, resignation or simple protest at a woman's wilfulness, Vaga stood aside.

"God keep you," was all he said, but he said it with conviction.

"Thanks for your thought and for much more," said Fieravanti, smiling down on the two who had drawn together, the woman with her large, strong hand on the man's shoulder. "If the pillar at Brettinoro opens as hospitable a door we shall do well," and he rode on.

But once out of earshot 'Tonio said, "Now why did Vaga change his tune at the last like that?"

"You forget," answered Fieravanti, "It was not his tune at all, it was the little mother's. But we shall ask at Castel-Cavo."

Turning in the saddle he waved farewell to the two, still standing before the inn door. It was the woman who responded with a broad palm in the air, friendly fashion; the other hand still rested on Vaga's shoulder. And as she waved her hand she was saying, tolerant contempt sharpening, but not acidly, her pleasant, full-chested voice:

"Thou and thy saints! Have sense, Matteo my man, have sense. What did the saints ever do for you or for me? But your foolish talk will make no difference; they will go by the lower road; you'll see."

"And every time I kneel in Our Lady's chapel yonder at Castel-Cavo the thought of who carved her will come between me and my prayer——"

"Is that the bone in your throat? Keep to the far side of the pillar and you'll not see the man's marble; what the eye does not see the heart need not fret over." Again she waved her hand as Fieravanti turned for the last time at the bend in the road. "And there's this—perhaps I was wrong, and the saints have done us a good turn. Who else was it that sent them here? Why was the shoe cast if not to send them to the Aquila Nera and on by the lower road, tell me that? Besides, why trouble too soon? Gian may not warn Lippo in time, which would be a pity; he carries a full purse, does your maker of saints. Gian will be none the worse for our share when

our day is done. Aye, and there's this too—he will have to carve more saints than ever if only to fill the purse again, and that will make for righteousness."

"But Lippo is savage under the skin and may——"

"The more reason to keep Lippo on our side. And there's this—Lippo won't hurt him unless he must. Why fret yourself over what may never happen? And if it is to happen, why, happen it will; so again why fret yourself?"

Which was sound sense, and proves that good fruit may grow out of foul soil. It also shows how shrewd a woman was the little mother; in the one breath she had argued Gian's gain and almost proved that theft by violence was a virtue, since Fieravanti's empty pocket would be to the greater glory of God! Human nature is always good at finding reasons of the highest for doing a baseness it greatly desires.

CHAPTER IV

"RIDE FAST"

THOUGH Fieravanti was not surprised to find Castel-Cavo little more than one half of Vaga's "three hours by day light," he did not regret the earlier halt. It was not simply that the road, winding as it did now by the edge of a sheer fall, now dipping to the bed of a roaring torrent, was dangerous to travel over through the velvet blackness of a March night, but the hill town itself stirred no repentance of the Aquila Nera.

Grey as a wasp's nest, Castel-Cavo with its dominating spire of San Giovanni delicately beautiful against the open sky, was picturesque enough from the opposite side of the little valley which sheltered the point of rock round whose apex the town clustered. But the realities of close acquaintance spoiled the picture. Its winding streets, paved with slippery, time-worn cobbles and too narrow to permit a wheeled vehicle to pass along their length, smelt so foully that not even the keen wind, cold from a score of mountain ridges where snow still lingered to the north, could sweeten their evil breath.

A frowning gate, broad with the breadth of the ancient walls, spanned the roadway. The portcullis hanging from the arch, and barred to the thickness of a man's arm, hinted its own tale of a hard life hardly held. There Fieravanti halted to make enquiry.

"Brettinoro?" The sergeant of the guard himself came out to make answer. "Yes, there are two roads to Brettinoro. The better? Some say one, some the other. See!

it is like this." Opening a hand palm outwards he smacked a doubled fist upon it. "You can go over the knuckles or round by the joints, just as you please. Over is the shorter, but there's little to choose in time."

"And what do you advise?"

"Round is easier on the beasts. Only, round or over, better have your hand on a knocker before sunset."

"Are the roads so bad, or is it wolves?"

"Wolves on two legs, Signor: thieves, to be plain. They do not often show a face to the daylight, but best lose no time."

"Thanks for your hint, friend. What do you know of the Aquila Nera below there?"

"Decent folk, Signor."

"So I thought, but one said one road, the other the other."

The sergeant laughed. "So they would, Signor. The little mother, as he calls her, likes her own way."

"Then she shall have it, since it is easier on the horses. Which do you say, 'Tonio?"

"The lower, Signor. There's no speed to be made over ridges such as these," and the *scarpellino* nodded with grim humour at the knuckles where the big bones of the sergeant's fist still rose clenched from the broad palm.

But the road was no such level road as the little mother's sweeping curve through the white ash of the hearth would have suggested. Certainly it hugged the side of the mountain spurs round which it wound its way, but now it so mounted a rocky headland, now dipped so abruptly into a wooded ravine to rise no less abruptly at the further side, or laid bare its bones to a foaming stream whose force and weight cried caution in the fording, that progress was necessarily slow.

And it was a lonely world, solitary rather than desolate, a world where the few who wrestled doggedly with

nature for their right to live clustered together as much for mutual heartening, lest the brooding of the eternal hills should crush the spirit, as for mutual protection. Thus there were wide ranges of solitude, broad silences given over to a wild life as yet too unthreatened by man to be furtive at the sight of him, dim woodlands, forests almost, of pine, oak, and chestnut, virgin as in primal days before men were, save for the narrow rutted roads, hacked through their sunless gloom, roads wet even at midday from the night's dews, so over-hung were they. Linking these were far-flung stretches of tumbled rock; rock living and rooted in its central matrix, rock torn from the upper ridges and hurled crashing valley-wards, like the curse of ancient Sisyphus, until some upheaved barrier, thrusting out a forbidding shoulder, stayed its course, but each, whether rooted or far-flung, alike lichened white and brown and yellow to the greater glory of God.

But it was not altogether a solitary world. Scattered through these silences, bedded in them, as it were, and strung upon the thread of the road like grey beads upon a seeming endless chain, were rare congeries of stone-built, squat huts. Outposts of man's advanced warfare upon nature, their nearness was heralded by rough pastures, pitifully small and as yet no more than half cleared, leading to still smaller fields where rye and barley pushed greenly through the hard-won soil.

A rough world, a world in process of being made over anew, a stubborn and silent world but not desolate. No! Where beauty and effort are there may be solitude, but never that sullen desolation which is a weariness of the spirit.

At one of these hamlets—village is too large a word—the travellers shared with poverty its midday meal of grey-black bread and cabbage soup thickened with barley meal. They had picked their hosts at hazard, their request

for food meeting with an apathetic rather than a grudged assent. Nor was there any show of curiosity while they ate. There is something of the chameleon in us all; unconsciously we receive and reflect our surroundings. These dwellers amid the silences were themselves silent. Perhaps they had not Matteo Vaga's need to be garrulous, perhaps they knew that travellers from Castel-Cavo must needs be bound for Brettinoro, but no questions were asked as at the Aquila Nera. The very children, shy and furtive, ate wide-eyed and staring but dumb. To Fieravanti's enquiries monosyllabic answers were returned, not from discourtesy, but because rising early, bedding weariness with the sun and labouring solitary amid solitudes in between, the habit of few words had grown upon them: a vocabulary of five hundred words would have over-run their need. Insensibly, through that chameleon-likeness, Fieravanti fell into their custom.

"How far to Brettinoro?"

"Six hours, Signor."

"And the roads?"

A twist of the shoulders, a spreading of the open hands palm upwards, a pushing out of the under lip in deprecation saved speech and was reply sufficient: the roads were neither good nor bad, and with that conversation failed.

But when Fieravanti drew out that full purse whose emptying by Lippo the little mother held would advance the greater glory of God and enrich Gian later on, speech came, though hesitatingly.

"Grazie, signor. Were we not so poor I would say no, but as you see, there are the little ones and so for their sakes, Grazie again."

He paused, measuring the height of the sun, then glanced at the children into whose lean, brown hands Fieravanti was slipping silver coins, and finally searched his

wife's face enquiringly. Understanding, she nodded. So encouraged he spoke again, this time earnestly.

"Signors both, ride fast. It is later than you think and the roads——" Again he paused, searching his scanty store of words. "The roads are not good in the shadows."

"Thieves?"

"For God's sake do not say I told you. He's a cruel devil, Lippo: he would burn the roof over our heads and the mother with the children."

"Six hours to Brettinoro?" In turn Fieravanti glanced upward. The sun had certainly passed its meridian; in less than six hours it would set and already their horses had done a fair day's work. "Thanks, friend, for your warning. Neither Lippo nor any one else shall hear of it. Who is this Lippo?"

But already repentance had come; travellers passed but Lippo remained. Better a stranger should lose a purse than a loose tongue risk the mother and the children—to say nothing of his own skin; and even if this traveller should keep silence Lippo might hear: Lippo had ears everywhere. Shifting his gaze he turned his dull eyes downwards where, sloping from the road, miles upon miles of a waste world stretched into the misty distance, ravines to right and left drawing together to descend in the one valley to that Via Emilia Fieravanti had quitted the day before and, further to the right, a projecting rocky spur along whose face wound the road to Brettinoro. Had he but known it, under shelter of the bare trees fourteen-year-old Gian Vaga was hastening homeward across the upper neck of the valley, nor was there a villain of a goat to hinder his speed.

"How should I know who he is, Signor? To find bread for five mouths is enough for me. But the sooner you are on the road the better, so I'll fetch the horses."

"Go you and help the father," said the woman, pushing the two elder children from the open door. Stooping, she lifted the youngest, a solemn-eyed, impassive girl of three. With the curly black head cuddled between chin and shoulder she turned to Fieravanti. "Who Lippo is we do not know; it's what he is that matters."

"True!" said Fieravanti as she paused. "In the long run it is the what we are, not the who, that counts. And this Lippo?"

"A brute, signor, ride fast."

"Will he fight?" It was 'Tonio who asked. His instincts rather lay that way.

"Not that!" The cry was that of a woman's sudden hurt, a woman's sudden fear. "For the love of Mary, not that—not that! Give him what he asks, it is cheapest."

"For him," said 'Tonio, and with that there came the ring of the horse hoofs.

Mounted and ready to start Fieravanti had another question, a natural sequence to Anthony Hawk's enquiry and the woman's affrighted protest.

"This Lippo, how many has he with him?"

"How should I know, Signor?" From where he stood in the middle of the road the peasant glanced up at his roof-tree. "Stones burn, though you may not think it—the mother with the children!"

"Do you know San Giovanni of Castel-Cavo?" asked 'Tonio.

"Surely." Though both answered it was into the woman's eyes that the light flashed.

"And the statue of Our Blessed Lady of Mercy?"

"Surely." This time only the woman spoke. From the eager heartiness of the assent it was clear that in some sorrow or another she had had much need of Our Blessed Lady of Mercy.

"The Master's chiselling," said Hawk, his glance shifting

to Fieravanti a moment. Turning to the woman again he added, "It was the Master who asked, How many has Lippo."

For a moment she stared him back in silence, the eager interest warm in the blood colouring her wind-bitten cheeks, then the gaze shifted to her husband. But he had half turned aside, his dull eyes on the broad, slaty stones roofing their hovel, for it was little better. His face was expressionless, but if he had any clear thought at all it was that they would have sore need of Our Lady of Mercy if Lippo took offence: only a fool meddled with Lippo, and he never meddled twice. Though this carver of Our Lady held his peace their own child's prattle might destroy them. But the woman was not content to leave the Master's question without reply. Now and then a Vaga may be touched by the message of art in the service of religion but it is the women who are the Church. Suddenly she laid a hand on the elder boy.

"Nello, tell the signor how many fingers thou hast on both hands and how many Luca?"

"Ten and ten-twenty," said Nello promptly, and stretched his own out in demonstration.

"Good! Twenty! But to sup thy soup, how many?"

"Five!"

"So! Five at a time are enough, but there are twenty if need be. God's power keep you, signor."

"Amen!" answered Fieravanti. "And thank you for more than a meal. There is no such help along the rough roads of life as the warm heart of a good woman."

"Oh, there's better than that!" she called after him, "the love of one, signor, the love of one. May you find it in Brettinoro!"

Bonnet in hand Fieravanti turned in saddle. "Supper and a bed will content me: God send you a sound roof-tree."

"Lippo is near and God far off," said the man, half under his breath. The cold fit was still heavy upon him.

"Lippo will never know. And, after all, what was it you said!"

"Enough and too much. Off with you to the stony field, Nello, thou and Luca. Here's March on us and a day half wasted."

But so long as the travellers were in sight the woman stood gazing after them, her three-year-old girl-child caught in her arms. Remembering Our Lady of Mercy in San Giovanni of Castel-Cavo she could not believe that God was further off than Lippo of the Brettinoro Road.

CHAPTER V

LIPPO

FAVOURED by a level stretch of highway, the maker of saints pushed on as rapidly as he dared in prudence with a half tired horse under him, and six hours of an unknown road to be faced. The peasant's sudden fit of cold fear had impressed him more deeply than any outpoured torrent of words, and for this reason—Upon the remoter country highways Lippos were common, too common to be feared greatly since, for the most part, they were a cowardly breed preying only on the weak, but here was a Lippo with a difference. A cruel devil, said the man, speaking out of conviction and before his terrors choked him; a brute, said the woman, meaning something yet stronger: and yet Lippo's kind were usually in favour with the peasants, from whom they drew their supplies, paying liberally. But presently rising ground broke the pace and Anthony Hawk drew alongside.

"Five?" he said interrogatively.

"Five who will fight."

"And we, Signor?"

"Two who will fight," answered Fieravanti laconically, and 'Tonio's grey eyes lit up. As has been said, his instincts lay that way.

It is a quality of love that, however deep the devotion, however prolonged the dearness, however broad the affection, there always remains an unknown country with new fields to explore, undreamed springs to be tapped. The Master's art had long held 'Tonio's imagination captive;

from their first meeting, now many months earlier, the Master's frank kindliness to an alien and a stranger had compelled a devotion growing deeper with every day of deeper knowledge, and ripening at last into love as such devotion must ripen if rooted in worthy soil. To the consummate artist? Yes! To the generous-hearted friend? Yes, again: but never had his heart opened its doors as now to this new Fieravanti, a maker of saints indeed and yet a man like himself. Let students of human nature say what they will of the attraction of opposites, it is the likeness to what we think greatest in ourselves that grips and binds: a modest soul in his art Anthony Hawk knew himself for a man. Now he laughed joyously as he tapped the handle of the four-foot staff hung from his saddle.

"How soon?"

"Too soon and no jest," answered Fieravanti. He was grave to sternness, nor was there any echo of the other's gaiety in his voice. "Did you catch the woman's meaning? Don't fight—never that! Why? Lest a man should take hurt? Simple hurts are common, so common that I would wager not a month passes but one or other takes hurt in the fields. Would such a hurt frighten her as she was frightened? No! But Lippo is a brute, and God pity the man who rouses the cruel devil in him. How soon? My hope is, not at all. Six hours to Brettinoro? A peasant who tramps the roads is a poor judge of a horse's pace; with luck we shall hammer Faldora's knocker before nightfall.

"It is my belief," said 'Tonio more soberly, "that this Lippo will not wait for nightfall.

"Not if he were warned. There! It's down hill again; push on while we can."

"But," persisted Hawk, as again they broke into a trot, "how soon, if at all?"

"How should I know? But my guess is—within an hour of Brettinoro."

Thereafter, the narrowness of the road keeping them apart, there was not much talk between them. Now one led, now the other, but as the afternoon drew on Anthony Hawk pressed to the front and having the lead kept it. If Fieravanti noted the manœuvre he made no comment. Throughout the day travellers had been few but now, except for a rare peasant, they had the road to themselves. The reason was plain; with a long day's journey to the nearest town to be faced, no man would be so foolish as to quit the safe shelter of Brettinoro except in the morning, lest darkness overtake him on the road.

Therefore when, at the end of a stretch of open level road, a solitary horseman moved from the shadows, halted a moment the better to observe them, turned rein and disappeared, they knew that Lippo was on the watch. Commonly 'Tonio, who still led, would have looked to the Master for guidance but not now. From the first his mind had been made up, his plan, the simplest plan in the world, was clear in his head, nor was there any need of memory of 'Sandro's muttered, "Bring him home safe."

Always he had been a little jealous of 'Sandro—'Sandro was of the Master's nation, 'Sandro could open his heart as few of 'Tonio's race ever can; without doubt, and very naturally, 'Sandro was better beloved. Here was an opportunity to prove a love that could not lay itself bare in words; very blithely Anthony Hawk pushed his tired horse a little further to the front, loosening his cudgel as he drove ahead but keeping it hidden under the skirts of his long cloak.

"To break through is best." he called across his shoulder and cantered on.

Meanwhile Lippo's sentinel had brought word that the sheep sent to their shearing were at hand. Fat towns-

folk, Gian had called them in his contempt of a single sword. The weapon of the peasant, who carried no sword, is a ready knife and so, naturally, to 'Tonio's staff he had given never a thought. The oversight had its effect. Moved by the contempt, Lippo had brought but three of his score with him. A display of too great force was not always discreet, it provoked comment, and unlike most of the world, Lippo had no crave for notoriety.

But the maker of saints was not the man to follow tamely on the heels of his *scarpellino*. Round the point which had swallowed up the lier-in-wait it was a neck and neck race, only to find that to break through was not possible—Lippo was too old a shearer of sheep to allow one of the flock to slip through his itching fingers.

The road narrowed; a ditch on either side, and beyond the ditch a tangle of undergrowth over-spread by trees whose stark branches almost met overhead, raised barriers no horse could face. Across this narrowness Lippo's chosen three were ranged, with Lippo himself, a fine, well-knit figure of a horseman, strongly mounted, a length or two in advance. Because of that shrinking modesty which avoided the world's gaze his wide-brimmed cloth bonnet was drawn forward, an added shadow to the shadow of the enclosing trees.

"Signor, shall I charge?" whispered 'Tonio as they advanced.

"No; wait. Spur when I cry, now!" and nodding assent 'Tonio tightened his grip on the cudgel still hidden by the cloak.

As the two drew near Lippo motioned to his cap in mock civility; for reasons which will be understood he did not bare his head. That neither surprise nor fear was shown perplexed him; then it broke upon him that they were warned, and under the skin of courteous pretence the devil in him stirred; if they did not submit

quietly to their shearing they should pay, they or another.

"There is no haste, signors both," he said cheerfully, slipping his sword from its sheath as he spoke and laying it across the pommel of his saddle in full view and ready for use. "No doubt you are bound for Brettinoro to pass the night? You know our Custom? Supper, a night's lodging, God be with you, and nothing to pay! Nothing to pay!" he repeated, "Have you ever thought, signors, what a fine world it would be if always there was nothing to pay?"

"First or last, all must be paid," retorted Fieravanti with meaning.

"True!" Lippo saw his way to a quip that pleased his grim humour and so spoke yet more cheerily. "First or last? Most true, signor, most true, and with you it is first! What? Would you take our Brettinoro hospitality and leave no gift for the poor? Surely not! Come, signors, be generous! Gold, silver, a ring, a jewelled clasp, what you will! One of you, there," and he jerked his head backward, "You, Giro, dismount and receive the Signors' alms. As for you," he lent forward with sudden truculence, all the smooth, ironical mockery roughened from his voice, "let there be neither delay nor demur; hide nothing—nothing, or by all the devils you'll sorrow like the damned. Search well, Giro."

"Thieves?" said Fieravanti, and whispered, "Be ready 'Tonio."

"A keen wit!" jeered Lippo, "Nearly as keen as this," and he tapped the naked sword. "Hasten, Giro."

But as Giro, having handed his reins to his neighbour, advanced, grinning, across the intervening space, Anthony Hawk flung back his cloak with a jerk of the bridle hand. The one gesture freed the cudgel and roused the tired horse, a rasp of the spurs drove him forward, a sidelong sweep of the staff, partially countered by an upflung arm,

sent Giro staggering and in the same instant by a twitch on the bit 'Tonio thrust Lippo's horse into the ditch; ahead, the riderless horse, plunging in fright, dragged its keeper aside—the way was open!

"Now! now!" shouted Hawk, and whirled his cudgel a second time.

With a sounding crack it landed on the stretched ribs of the fellow straining with the double reins, and without so much as drawing steel Fieravanti was racing side by side with his *scarpellino*. The road lay clear to Brettinoro; little Gian Vaga might have stayed at home herding villain goats, he would be none the richer for his long tramp in the cold dark before the dawn. Pursuit? There was none: surprise and confusion had given the quarry too long a lead, and the cruel devil in Lippo the brute raged empty.

Only when a slow hill with a clear backward trail of two furlongs length had been topped did Fieravanti halt: then, leather to leather, he laid a hand on Hawk's arm.

"Who gave you leave to take command?" he said jestingly, the depth in his voice belieing the seeming rebuke. "Lippo would have killed you if he could."

"What matters? You would have broken through."

"And left you to die? 'Tonio, 'Tonio, these many months we have been comrades, where did you learn that of me?"

For a moment 'Tonio stared, then the rushing blood stained his fair skin from neck to scalp. "A fool of fools! An utter fool! an idiot-brained drivel of a fool! As God lives, I never thought of that!"

"No!" and the Master's grip tightened. "You only thought that I should win safe, let happen what might to yourself. I'll remember that all my life and be the better man for the memory. For a righteous man some would even dare to die! God send me more righteous and

more worthy—worthy of love that is love to the death, 'Tonio, my friend."

"Oh, Master, it would have been easy," said Hawk, and there being no clatter of pursuing hoofs behind them they pushed slowly on their way in silence.

Fieravanti was deeply moved. There is always a something inspiring awe in the revelation of a great passion: here was that rarest, perhaps greatest, and certainly finest of all passions, a man's love for a man even to the sacrifice of death. That a man's love for a woman, or a woman's for a man, should rise to such desperate heights is not strange. In both there is the mysterious call of nature as an impelling force, and in the man that natural chivalry and strength protecting weakness, that unconscious appeal to the highest in our nature. But that a man should lay bare his life for a man, and that not even in the exaltation of hot blood, but aforethought and by calculation, is rare. Very humbly Fieravanti asked himself wherein lay the justification for so great a sacrifice? He found no answer. It is the recurrent and blessed mystery of daily life that through all failure, all imperfection, all knowledge of our own unworthiness, love remains love.

CHAPTER VI

THE CUSTOM OF BRETTINORO

Dusk was grey in the deeper ravines, though the glamour of early twilight still lay mellow on the hillside, as they caught their first sight of Brettinoro, a sprawl of low-roofed houses bordering the highway on both sides, with the square bell-tower of the village church rising midway. From long experience Fieravanti knew what to expect—the doors thrown thriftily wide to catch the last of the daylight, a charcoal brazier just beyond each threshold, a cooking pot steaming on the live coals or swung above them from a tripod, and everywhere a battle of tongues, broken by little bursts of laughter or a scolding voice, and the wail of an urchin whose ear has been cuffed wisely and well.

But in at least one thing Brettinoro differed from all of the many like towns scattered through Romagna and the Marches—Brettinoro alone possessed the Custom and the Custom was a never-failing stimulant to curiosity. At the first clang of the horse hoofs on the cobbles the babble quieted, as a stone flung into an ivied wall silences the excited chatter of homing sparrows. Into every open door a group gathered, those behind peering over the shoulders of those in front, all eager to know the luck of the travellers. As has been said, the poor as well as the rich hung their knockers on the pillar of the Custom; would these two sup rye pottage and lie on straw, or sleep between lawn sheets after a supper which might content a prince? As for the children, with an eye to the guide's

fee they were already flocking to the market-place, or hanging in twos and threes beyond the flanks of the horses.

Because of the rarity of towns in that wild hill country the market place of Brettinoro was larger than the needs of the actual inhabitants. There, on certain days, flocked the country folk by the hundred, bringing their wares for barter rather than for sale. Therefore there were many booths, empty now, ranging down the centre and along the sides of the four square open space, longer than it was broad: mere roofs, those booths, roofs supported by slender, untrimmed pine-stems cut from the neighbouring woods.

At a break in the central line stood a watering-trough, and beyond the trough a pillar six or eight feet high. Here, as round some wandering *giocolare-policinello*—that most immortal of plays, not yet upon the stage—the children were gathered, still silent except for whispered speculations. Warned by Luca Melone what to expect, Fieravanti drew rein in front of the trough and searched the pillar with curious eyes.

It was a flat slab of polished grey marble remarkable for nothing but the score or more of metal rings affixed in rows to its upper face, an inch or two of space separating each from each so that there was no jostling, no confusion. If difference of form existed it was too slight to attract the eye: nowhere was there heraldic device, individuality or advertisement to draw attention, certainly nothing to single out the fourth ring from the left in the third row from the top.

"Which?" said Fieravanti, looking round the circle of expectant faces, all keenly alert. But as no answer came, not even so much as a significant glance shot at this or that ring hung from the grey marble, he remembered a chance sentence His Grandeur had let fall and decided to

put its truth to the test. Taking a silver coin between finger and thumb—silver was rare in Brettinoro, gold almost unknown—he held it up for all to see. "Come now; you know the rings as you know the bottom of your pockets: where shall I sleep softest?"

Still there was no answer, only the small, expectant faces grew unnaturally grave; almost, it seemed in the failing light, as if that premature age which is the unfailing heritage of the poor, had suddenly fallen upon them. Then one, raggeder than the rest and for that reason, perhaps more sorrowfully wise in the ways of a rough world, piped out, hardly above his breath, "We daren't, signor, they would burn the roof over our head; not for our lives, we daren't."

From where he sat, stirrup-leather to stirrup-leather with the Master while their beasts drank thirstily, 'Tonio laughed.

"You talk like parrots! They'll burn the roof, say you; the mother with the children, says—I don't know his name. Only, with him it is Lippo, and with you——"

"Silence, 'Tonio," Fieravanti broke in sharply. "You may do a mischief and never know it. So we must choose for ourselves must we?" he went on, slipping the coin back to his pocket, to the sore disappointment of many longing and very hungry hearts. "Well, here's for it!" Rising in his stirrups he let his hand play here and there across the face of the marble as if in doubt, then suddenly seizing the ring which hung fourth from the left in the third row from the top he knocked vigorously. "Supper and a bed, with your leave, whoever you are!"

Instantly the silence broke up in a shout. "Faldora!—The Count Ascanio! Signor, signor, choose me!—choose me!" Round the horses they surged like a brood of hungry puppies round their feeding-dish, all clamouring at once and as many as within reach plucking at Fiera-

vanti's cloak to call attention. "Me, signor, choose me"—they importuned—"Me—me—me."

"Faldora? Count Ascanio Faldora?" said Fieravanti, as if he had not known whose door would open to the sound of that knocking on the flat of the marble. "Then we are in luck, are we? But why should I choose one of you and for what?"

"As guide, signor," they shouted, and again the clamour rose, "Me, signor, me—me—me!"

"Of course we shall need a guide. I grow stupid in my old age." Leisurely he looked from one to the other of the upturned eager faces until his gaze crossed that of the raggedest of them all. He stood on the outer verge of the circle, as if all his little life it had been the lot of his poverty to be thrust aside, nor, being so far removed from hope, had he shouted his importunity. Only his eyes, dark and wistful in the hollowed pallor of his pinched face, pled the cry of his heart; Fieravanti, understanding and answering, beckoned him above the throng of upturned, eager faces. "Come, little son, I choose you. How far to the Casa Faldora?"

"Ten minutes, signor," a dozen voices chorused, but there was an end to importunity. Once a guide was chosen there was no more pestering; that was the unwritten law of the Custom.

"Ten minutes?" The circle had parted and the chosen guide, the wan pallor of his pinched face chased away by the fluttering tumult of his rejoicing heart, was standing by Fieravanti's knee. Stooping, the maker of saints caught him by the slack of his patched jerkin, lifted him to the front of his saddle, and laid an arm round him to hold him safe. "It grows dark and we'll travel faster so, though Roland has not often carried two men on his back! Which way? Across the market and up the street yonder? Good!" and with a smiling nod to those left

behind Fieravanti turned his horse as directed, Hawk following.

Not until clear of the houses and breasting an increasingly steep hill, where the road wound upward through an unfenced vineyard, did Fieravanti speak again, then:

"What name, little son?"

"Piero, signor."

"And no other?"

"Buti, signor."

"How many are there of you at home?"

"Three more and the mother, signor."

"No father?"

"No, signor, not these five months," and under the firm grip of the securing arm Fieravanti felt the thin ribs convulse as a sob choked in the throat.

"And so times are hard?"

"Now and then, signor."

"But you are the man growing up, and then it will be all right?"

"Oh, yes, signor, yes," and with the choke swallowed the treble rose almost in a lilt. "It will be all right then."

"But I'll wager you work in the fields now?"

"Oh, yes, signor, of course; but—but——"

"Yes, I know." Over the patched jerkin the sensitive fingertips of the maker of saints fumbled gently. The broken sentence had no need of completion. "Skin and bone can do so little! If only the soul and spirit could work! Then all would be right even now?"

"Yes, signor," he answered, not in the least understanding.

"And for whom do you work, my brave man-in-the-making?"

"For the Count, signor."

"Faldora? But of course you would! Faldora of Pesaro owns Brettinoro, I suppose?"

"I don't know, signor."

"Of course not; it is none of your business! And what manner of man is Count Ascanio?"

"A great man, signor, the very greatest."

"And good to the poor?"

"Yes, signor; yes—when he thinks of them." There had been a pause, a hesitancy, now it ended in a whole-hearted rush. "The signorina, she is good."

"She thinks, eh?"

"Oh, yes, signor; there are times she comes herself."

"That is indeed thought," said Fieravanti drily. "And how many Faldoras are there?"

"Two, signor, the old lord and the signorina."

Then, drawing confidence from the warm, strong arm lapped round him, Piero waxed garrulous. Here was a theme he loved. Just where his own shrewd observation ended,—and the observation of ten years old with its wits sharpened upon the rough grindstone of necessity can be disconcertingly incisive at times,—and the gossip of his elders began Fieravanti could not decide for certain. But this much was clear, to the child the old lord was very old and very great, there was none greater than Ascanio Faldora in all that hill country. Clearly, too, Faldora of Pesaro had long and close acquaintance with death and sorrow—acquaintance even beyond that which is the sure heritage of age. Time had dealt hardly with his House. War, sickness or accident had stripped the old stock bare to one single distaff shoot, that Lucia Faldora whom Luca Melone had thought not unlike the Magdalene left behind in Forli. At that point the maker of saints cut short Piero's garrulity.

"And these two are all?"

"All of our own, signor." On the instant the eager

buoyancy dulled from the lad's voice. It was as if a drift from the east had suddenly chilled the warmth of a May south-wind.

"But there is another? What is he called?"

"Carlo Faldora, signor." The reluctance to speak was yet clearer.

"Carlo Faldora? And what does Brettinoro say of Carlo Faldora?"

"Oh, signor, how should I know anything of Signor Carlo?"

"You? Nothing! But you have ears to your head; what does Brettinoro say?"

For a dozen yards the tired horse plodded up hill through silence, then the pinched face was half turned back and upwards as the small voice whispered, "Do not ask, signor, I am afraid." But almost next instant Piero cried, "The Casa, Signor," and Fieravanti knew his long day's ride was at an end.

And a worthy end, to judge by the mass of the grey bulk which loomed with such height and breadth against the thickening dark of the twilight. Like many of his temperament before him and many who were to follow, Leonardo da Vinci and Michael Angelo to name only two of the greatest, Fieravanti, while no soldier, was deeply versed in the sterner art of military defence. Even in the dusk, therefore, a single glance at the loop-holed, crenellated walls with their flanking turrets, made clear how strong a fortress was this ancient cradle of the Faldoreschi.

"What next?" he said, drawing rein.

"I knock, and when the door is opened I cry, *"The Custom of Brettinoro;* and—and—that is all, signor." The small voice quavered as Piero ended; after all, there might be no guide's fee.

"Knock, then," said Fieravanti, lifting him to the

ground. But while, standing a-tiptoe to reach the dragon's head hanging from the oaken door, barred and studded with iron, Piero roused the hollow echoes, the maker of saints groped in that purse whose emptying was to redound to the greater glory of God, and so, the gold ducat hidden between finger and thumb, waited till a bolt slipped smoothly back in its oiled socket and the door was opened. *"The Custom of Brettinoro"* piped Piero, then, leaning down Fieravanti caught him by the shoulder.

"Double that in thy fist and run home to the mother as fast as legs will carry you," he said, and turned to the open door. "The Custom of Brettinoro? Is it convenient?" while Piero, with a breathless "Grazie, signor," fled downhill into the gloom, his fist indeed fast doubled and thrust deep into the pocket of his ragged breeches.

What his prize was only God and the signor knew but it felt too small for copper and the mother would be the next to know when he laid it triumphantly in her lap. Five sols? If too large for copper the feel of it was too small for five sols and the warm exuberance of his pride cooled. Five sols would be a god-send after the pinching of the long, hard winter.

"Convenient?" With the lantern carried in his left hand held high the opener of the door, Tribalda, Faldora's captain of the guard, surveyed the claimants of the Custom for an instant, then laughed tolerantly. "How many are there of you? Two? It would be convenient if your two were fifty. There is a hook there on the right, fasten your horses and a stableman will attend to them presently. What names shall I send to Count Ascanio?"

Always his tone was courteous, but there was nothing warmer in his welcome than convention demanded. Travelling merchants, such as he assumed these two were, Tribalda held in that contempt common to every age

which fails to recognise that a nation's true greatness springs from, and is founded deeply in, its commerce. It was even doubtful whether, at supper presently, they would sit above the salt. There was, therefore, the civility necessary to any guest of Ascanio Faldora's, however humble the station, but it was cold civility and nothing more.

"Our names? Marco Fieravanti and Anthony Hawk, both of Forli."

"Hawk?" repeated Tribalda as he set a bell clanging, "Not of our nation, I think?"

"English," answered 'Tonio gruffly. It galled him that the Master should be so coolly received; but when his indignation would have cried, "In what clod's hole of the earth have you lived that you do not know Marco Fieravanti of Forli—Marco Fieravanti of all Italy!" the Master silenced him by a pressure on the arm.

"English?" said Tribalda, "And a trader in Forli?"

"Trader? Did I say trader? We are——"

"Travellers, and claimants of a Custom not of our making," broke in Fieravanti, and with that the summons of the bell was doubly answered.

Through the dusk an out-door helper appeared to lead away their horses, and across the hall, leisurely as became the greatness of his office, a dignity approached who might have been mistaken for Ascanio Faldora himself, but for the broad-linked silver chain hanging from the shoulders and across the breast of his severely solemn velvet: also, he neither wore sword nor carried a dagger at his hip. To him Tribalda turned.

"Two guests of the Custom, major-domo; Anthony Hawk of England and Marco Fieravanti of Forli."

"Fieravanti first, by your leave," said Hawk.

"You are welcome, signors both," said the major-domo,

but without enthusiasm. In his heart he despised the Custom. That Faldora of Pesaro should grant hospitality at his pleasure, and of a style in keeping with the ancient dignity of the great House, was well, but that any chance passer-by could hammer on a stone pillar and demand that hospitality of insolent right vexed his pride. Naturally, the Church, whether Cardinal-Archbishop or barefooted friar, was always welcome, or Faldora's peers if any such there were. But Fieravanti? Hawk? These were none of the great names of Italy, north or south, and so it mattered nothing which of them came first. "Follow me, signors," he went on, and led the way across the great hall.

And a great hall it was. Never had Anthony Hawk seen its like, with its rows of lamps flaring from iron cressets, and yet of such a vaulted height that the groined roof overhung him dim in shadows. Without doubt it had been an audience chamber in the old days when Faldora of Pesaro ruled over lands as broad as a small kingdom, ruled with a heavy or a light hand as seemed good to him, dispensing high and low justice with none to question his authority.

Yes, certainly an audience chamber. In front of the broad stone stairway opening upward at the end of the hall remote from the door a dais had stood; upon the flagged floor, rush strewn, suitors had thronged; over the rail of the wide gallery, thrust out from the rough courses of the four walls, had leaned the knights and dames of Faldora's petty court. But all that had passed. Now this later Faldora of Pesaro might hold Seigneurial state within these walls, but time and the growth of the Papal power had clipped his authority; the dais had been swept away, the galleries rang hollow under a rare footfall, and where Faldora's subjects had pled their cause,

or shivered before the merciless sentence of their doom, Faldora's shrunken guard held possession.

But if the greatness of power had passed, something of the luxury power breeds when the two are linked through many generations remained. The carving of the stone balusters bordering the great staircase was the handiwork of an artist almost as renowned in his day as Marco Fieravanti in his, their rail a rounded slab of white marble cunningly inlaid with verde-antico and lapis lazuli after the fashion of Florentine mosaic: opposite, upon ascending shelves projecting from shallow niches, rested the spoils of many a sacked city—antique busts dating from the Cæsars, brasses, bronzes, Etruscan urns, fretted lamps from Umbria; but when Fieravanti would have paused the major-domo waved him impatiently upward.

"There is no time, signor, no time. Already supper may be delayed and my lord kept waiting. This way lies your sleeping-room; your travelling-bags will follow and I beg you to make haste."

Passing down a corridor at the stair-head he entered a room whose furnishings, sufficient but severely plain, were, he considered, appropriate to the honest obscurity of these guests of the Custom. Elsewhere were silken hangings, mirrors set in carved and gilded frames, glass work of Venice, painted ewers, silver lamps swung from bracket-arms of delicate hammered work, but for these traders upon the hospitality of the Custom the wooden bench pushed back against the plastered wall, the earthen ewer and pitcher, the clay lamp—caught up at hazard from the hall below and the wide bed filling one fourth the space were luxury enough. Nor could it have entered Fieravanti's head to protest; not only must beggars not be choosers, but no inn of Brettinoro, had it possessed one, could have offered one half the comfort.

Clearly, the service of the Casa was well organised. On their heels followed a lackey with their saddle-bags, and at the door the major-domo paused for a last word.

"You know the custom of the Custom? No? In fifteen minutes my lord will send for you; then supper."

CHAPTER VII

FALDORA OF PESARO

Nor were the fifteen minutes too few. Men, except the very great, travelled light, nor, at times, were even the very great fastidious. Though Fieravanti carried with him sufficient to appear with dignity and self respect at the Court of Arzano he contented himself now with removing the soil of travel, and the substitution of more suitable foot wear for his heavy riding-boots, an example which Anthony Hawk followed.

After a sharp knock the door was flung open and the servant who had brought their saddle-bags appeared. He, too, despised the Custom, or, rather, after the manner of his type in all ages, such of its guests as faced the world with nothing nobler than a cudgel to maintain their dignity.

"You were in luck, down there in the village," he said familiarly as he lounged against the door-post. "Even below the salt you will eat and drink as never before in your lives."

"God be praised for good meat," answered Fieravanti, smiling. "Lead on, friend."

"Oh, there is no such haste. What is your trade down in Forli?"

"I chisel stone."

"A stone-cutter? And you come knocking at our door like any lord? But these hands of yours——"

But 'Tonio could control his rage no longer. Pushing

forward he caught the fellow by the shoulders, whirled him round and thrust him through the door at a run.

"Hands? Since you know so much of hands, what am I, with hands like these? Be civil, or I'll show you an English custom you'll not forget—to fling impertinence down stairs! Now lead on as you were bid."

"Gently, 'Tonio, gently," reproved Fieravanti but with no chiding in the reproof. "For you, good fellow, we shall answer your questions to your master who, no doubt, bade you ask them."

"My lord?" If there had been fear in his face as 'Tonio's grip closed upon him there was terror now. "No, signor, no, no; for mercy's sake say nothing to my lord. He would——"

"Say that a guest is sacred, let his station be what it may? I can well believe it! For this time you are safe; be warned." But as they followed him along the way they had come Fieravanti linked an arm in Hawk's. "Be warned you also. Hold your temper better in check lest you shame us both. I think now we were wrong to trade upon this Custom; remember, we are not raised to the purple like Luca Melone."

"I had rather be Marco Fieravanti of Forli than ten Luca Melones," answered 'Tonio sturdily.

"What? You would choose the chisel and white smock rather than mitre and cassock? You northern heathen! And God forbid that I should be ten men. To be one man, true in heart and soul to the best we know is burden enough! And that is what you were to-day. But keep your hot temper for the Lippos of life; never waste good red blood on what is not worth the rage."

"All the same," said 'Tonio, "I would have half shaken the life out of him."

"Yes, and sunk yourself to his level! You forget; passion levels down as well as up. I see we have arrived.

Be warned, 'Tonio. Come what may keep a fast grip on yourself."

"Is it Faldora you fear?"

But Fieravanti had only time to shake his head as the lackey, passing a step beyond an open door, turned, and the major-domo slipped forward to meet them. Faldora? No! The very perfect gentleman of Luca Melone's admiration could be trusted to show guests of whatever quality all courtesy; but Faldora was not alone in the Casa, and against those of lesser breed Fieravanti's warning stood. It is always those whose nature is of the lesser breed whose courtesy may be doubted.

"This way, signors," said the major-domo in his most sonorous voice and yet with such a subtle hint of condescending tolerance as almost to suggest a command. "It is the custom of my lord to receive the guests of the Custom alone."

But, as he crossed the threshold, Fieravanti half paused in his slow stride. "Poor Ordelaffi!" he said under his breath as the hard and flaunting brilliancy, the voluptuous warmth and riot of colour of forty-eight hours past leaped to his memory. And indeed, the Tyrant of Forli might have learned much of the grace of beautiful living from Faldora of Pesaro, who, however he had fallen from power, still held fast by a worthy tradition. Here was no shimmer of gaudy silks, no scintillation of tinsel, no extravagance of gilding, no flare of garish lamps, but just such a harmony of restful, quiet beauty as the soul of the great Emperor had loved.

Compared with the length, breadth and height of Ordelaffi's reception hall the chamber was insignificant. But true significance cannot be expressed in dimensions and the artist in Fieravanti stirred, exultantly glad within him, at sight of the delicate-hued tapestries, the carvings, bronzes, castings, the Eastern rugs scattered upon the

mosaic floor, the painted ceiling, the shining marble exquisitely pure in the mellow light of wax candles held in many-branched silver candle sticks severely modelled.

And his host? As Faldoras of old had stood to receive their peers so now Count Ascanio waited to welcome the guests brought to his doors by the chance hazard of the Custom. What was the bishop's phrase? A grand seigneur and a most noble gentleman? To Fieravanti, a keener judge of men than any bishop in the purple, he looked both to the life! Surely no description could better have fitted that tall erect figure, lean without meagreness and straight as one of his own pines?

For all his age few would have called Ascanio Faldora old. Neither the weight of years nor the burden of sorrow had rounded his shoulders or bent his back; if the ancient fire had dulled in the dark eyes, half hidden by the caverned brows, it still smouldered beneath the bitter ashes of the years, and could rouse at times with all its flashing lightning. Close clipped white hair hid the thin lips, but the snow concealed no trembling of the mouth. From the broad forehead, furrowed and cobwebbed as much by thought and the facing of the wind in open spaces as by Time, the short, crisp, iron-grey hair, still thick and strong of growth, was brushed severely back. For the rest, his dress of fine purple cloth matched the man. Plain to austerity, and unrelieved except for the lawn showing at wrists and throat, it suggested afresh His Grandeur's descriptive sentence; if the jewel of a knightly Order hung upon his breast it was less in his own honour than that Faldora of Pesaro might do honour to his guests.

Having led the way into the reception chamber the major-domo stood aside in silence; as it was Count Ascanio's whim to receive the guests of the Custom alone so also he chose to welcome them without formality. Ad-

vancing a step or two he held out his hand to the sculptor, a long, lean, sinewy hand browned by sun and wind, the hand of manhood in its full strength rather than of age, nor was the ancient characteristic vigour of the grasp abated; whether to welcome a friend or strike an enemy Faldora's hand still answered Faldora's heart as readily as in the days of his youth. Now with grasp answering grasp that sudden flame leaped to the caverned eyes as the stern face softened in a smile: all his life long he had loved that rare manhood which is of the soul and spirit rather than of the flesh.

"Messer Fieravanti of Forli" he said questioningly. Then with their clasp still knit he laid an impulsive hand on the sculptor's shoulder. "Not Marco Fieravanti. But it could be no other! The greatness fits the man and the man the greatness. Ser Marco, you are very welcome to Faldora. And who is this that is with you?"

"Anthony Hawk, a pupil who may one day teach the Master."

"Do you agree?" and Faldora held out his hand to the Englishman.

"No, signor, not being altogether a fool," answered Hawk bluntly.

"For that answer I have hope of you!" Beyond his guests he looked towards the major-domo, still in waiting by the entrance. "Giuseppe, warn the signorina and Ser Carlo. Are you from Forli, Messer Fieravanti?" he went on as, muttering to himself, "He took both by the hand, so both must go above the salt," Giuseppe closed the door behind him.

"From Forli to Arzano."

"Arzano?" The courteous voice sharpened as those ancient fires which Luca Melone had noted flashed an instant. "Mars; not Venus nor the service of the Church takes you to Arzano, I think?"

Fieravanti laughed. "If that be so, Illustrissimo, then you know more than I."

"I know Arzano has more need of soldiers than statues of saints, of fortifications than furnishing to its churches."

"So much the better! The making of saints must be done upon the spot and is the work of months, but for walls and bastions, scarps, counterscarps and palisades a plan is sufficient. I shall be back in Forli the sooner. Where my trade is there I must be."

"Trade, do you call it?"

"What else? What is trade but to sell or barter this or that? The mercer his yards of silk, I my skill, the soldier his sword."

"The soldier?" Faldora stiffened his lean straightness yet more rigidly upright as the pride hinted by Luca Melone lifted its head. "I have fought through more years than you have lived, Signor Fieravanti, and never yet sold my sword."

"Oh, I grant you the pay is not always the same; to this one a full pocket, to that one lands, to some the pure zest and joy of fighting: with you, Illustrissimo, honour and your nation's life. But sale or barter it is, and so a trade."

"For yourself, you know best." Vexed, Faldora turned to 'Tonio, "and you, do you also call your art a trade?"

"Signor, a man must live, and it seems to me that the thing by which a man lives——"

Waiting for no end to the sentence Faldora swung round on the sculptor. "And I, do I live by my sword?"

"For your honour, and the honour of your name, which you have maintained by your sword, if it were lost——"

"Life, too, might go. Ser Fieravanti you mesh me in your net of words, but never before, in his own house or out of it has a Faldora of Pesaro been likened to a Jew huckster."

"Signor—Count Ascanio—have I offended? You shame me. Nothing was further from my thought, nothing would pain——"

"Enough, enough. Offended? No. Our worlds are poles apart, that is all. Lucia," looking beyond the sculptor he raised a beckoning hand, "I present to you two guests of the Custom: Marco Fieravanti of Forli you know by repute."

Engrossed, the maker of saints had not heard the opening of the door, now he turned hastily. What was it Luca Melone had said? As beautiful as your Magdalene and not unlike? But that was flattery—flattery of the marble. And yet the marble had beauty: honest to himself in praise as well as censure Fieravanti knew and loved the loveliness of the sorrowful, cold stone, as every artist loves the handiwork which realises the conception of his thought; but here—or was that the difference hinted by His Grandeur? At its best the Magdalene was sorrowful, cold and a stone, while here——

Fieravanti's swift train of thought snapped, crumbling in upon itself at a second, surer scrutiny. The difference? Were these not, rather, the likeness, leaving the difference to be sought elsewhere? Sorrowful? Upon the heels of the flashed question the answer flashed. What is life, much of it, but the wearing of a mask? But because his trade was what it was, and because a true Maker of Saints looks deeper than the flesh, since it is not always the saint who seems saintly, Fieravanti caught, or thought he caught, a shadow behind the masking smile, a cloud with sorrow in its heart as a summer cloud hides rain; not the sorrow of the Magdalene with its agonised heart of bitter repentance, that was impossible for a Lucia Faldora, but a troubled fret, a cark that gnawed, a care that brooded, a—yes, a sorrow.

And cold? A stone? There also Luca Melone had surely put that shrewd finger of the Church's knowledge of women on a truth. Cold? Even while they smiled the very perfect lips were coldly set, the clear dark eyes cold and indifferent; and when she spoke the full, rich voice was cold for all its pleasant sweetness. Why? Again upon the heels of the questioning thought the answer flashed—the Faldora pride? In Count Ascanio, His Grandeur had said, it was the weakness of a splendid nature; a fiery weakness as Fieravanti had just proved: in Lucia Faldora might it not be that less worthy pride which is own father to cold scorn for what it holds in traditional contempt, such as, for instance, guests of the Custom who were not of her breed or nurture? Perhaps; at least so he read her in that first searching scrutiny.

For the rest, she was tall, as became her race, and a very perfect woman so far as God's making shaped her, very perfect from the crowning of the dark hair, looped in ample braids about the shapely head, down by gracious lines and curves of beauty to the arched foot thrust out below the hem of the silken skirt whose grey folds, after the fashion of the time, swept the floor behind her. Yes, very perfect, but, judged by that sorrow, that coldness and unconscions scorn, no saint or saint in the making—as yet!

"Marco Fieravanti of Forli?" The unwarm smile, it was negative rather than cold, died from her face. "But Tribalda said they were travelling merchants——"

"Traders," interrupted Faldora with sour humour. "His own word, Lucia: traders—traders."

"We have differed, the Count and I," said Fieravanti, "I am of the people and speak as the people——"

"Differed? Oh, by my faith, no!" Again Faldora broke in, his vexed temper still on edge. "It is just that

you know your own affairs and place in the world and I know mine."

"As all Romagna knows and honours it," said Fieravanti. "God send Italy many Ascanio Faldoras, said His Grandeur to me in Forli not three days ago."

But the quotation was unfortunate. "Many Ascanio Faldoras? Perhaps, yes, perhaps. But God must first send children, and here we are with Lent at our doors. I am the last of my blood, Ser Marco! May He spare me life to hear small feet of my name patter on the empty stairs!"

"His Grandeur?" The girl's voice was as cold as the unwarm smile to welcome travelling merchants had been. As cold? Colder? Freezingly chilly! The blunt reference to empty stairs and what might set their echoes flying had stirred distaste. "You saw His Grandeur three days ago? We loved him for his gentleness."

"Shall I let you into a secret, signorina?" With the set purpose of relieving the distaste Fieravanti laughed as he grew confidential. "And if I do, will they burn the roof over His Grandeur's head!"

"They? Who are they?"

"The Keepers of the Custom! Illustrissimo, I have a confession to make. It was by no hazard of chance that I knocked on Brettinoro's pillar to-night with the fourth ring in the third row from the top."

"Ah," said Faldora stiffly, "the good bishop was pleased to be pleased with our poor entertainment."

Fieravanti answered the offence rather than the words, "I think His Grandeur cares little whether he sups with Faldora of Pesaro or upon rye pottage, and I care as little with him."

"Then why——"

"Does it matter?" This time it was the girl who in-

terrupted, formally courteous, but with the vexed distaste unabated. "But for him Signor Fieravanti would not have knocked at our door: every way we are in His Grandeur's debt." And with that the major-domo flung the door wide.

CHAPTER VIII

FIERAVANTI FACES A PROBLEM

THE procession to the supper-room was one of rigid ceremony, never abated, never extended, let there be guests or no guests. First walked two lackeys bearing candles set in tall silver candlesticks severely plain. Clearly, these were borne for dignity, not for light, since the passage was in a blaze and the draught bred by the slow march guttered their flames to blue points: then came Giuseppe, the major-domo, with a five-foot wand of office whose end he clicked upon the marble floor at every second step: Faldora followed alone. No doubt Luca Melone had walked by his side, because of his purple, but not a man whose trade it was to chisel stone. Next were Fieravanti and the girl, behind them 'Tonio side by side with Tribalda, who had slipped into place from the mouth of a side passage; closing the rear came two more lackeys also bearing candles. At the door of the supper-room the leading candle-bearers stepped each to one side and the small procession passed on between.

The household, and there were many, two score at the fewest, had already assembled below the salt; two clerics, Faldora's domestic chaplains, occupied places one on either side of the upper table: all were standing. Drawing back the carved armchair set at the table-head the major-domo waited in readiness to push it into place as his master seated himself.

"Lucia, your place as usual on my right; Ser Fieravanti,

here on my left, next you your—your friend and pupil: Reverend Fathers—Tribalda——"

A wave of the hand indicated that they knew their accustomed seats, but between Lucia Faldora and the elder priest a vacant place was reserved. While all were yet upon their feet Faldora bowed gravely to right and left below the salt and was answered by a yet deeper reverence.

"Father, a grace." But once seated he turned to Fieravanti. "Arzano, you said? You know the city? No? Then I am at an advantage. It was—let me see!" He paused, fingering thoughtfully the stem of the glass Giuseppe had filled with the red wine of his own vineyards here at Brettinoro. "Yes, it is just twenty-nine years past since we sacked Arzano, the Duke of Urbino and I. Now Arzano is my very good friend and if you are wise—knowledge grows through success as well as through failure, Ser Marco, though failure is the surer teacher—if you are wise, I say, you will advise Arzano——"

Forthwith he plunged into an ordered jargon of scarp and counterscarp, banquette, terreplein, fraise, abatis, abstruse talk which none but Fieravanti could fully comprehend or follow, but all with that clarity, that sureness of detail, that shrewdness of criticism and nicety of apportioned value which speak the trained experience undulled by time or failing memory. Tribalda, a good soldier but without the experience, was engrossed, listening: the remaining four rarely spoke, though once the younger priest, after a whisper from 'Tonio, leaned across to the elder, saying softly, "Fieravanti—Fieravanti, the sculptor of Forli. You have seen the Sant' Agnese? Oh, beautiful!" Whereat the elder, his eyes alert and bright, nodded back. Certainly he knew the Saint Agnese. At the lower table the murmuring talk was continuous but no distinct word rose above the subdued level of careful respect.

It was while Faldora was emphasising with outstretched forefinger some point in his theory of Arzano's defences that the door behind Fieravanti clicked open and shut, and a gay voice broke in upon the demonstration.

"*Mea maxima culpa!* But Uncle, and you, my cousin, if I have lost half my supper I am surely punished enough?"

Pausing with extended finger Faldora glanced up, vexed at the interruption. "There are guests, Carlo. Signor Fieravanti, I present to you my nephew, Carlo Faldora," and rising Fieravanti faced the gamester convicted forty-eight hours before of cheating with cogged dice; that he was also the bully of the previous morning he forgot for the moment.

On Carlo Faldora's part there was no recognition. Fieravanti? Who or what was Fieravanti? If he had heard the name, as no doubt he had, it had been forgotten; for him the making of saints had no interest. With a careless bow and cursing in his heart this Custom which willy nilly thrust such cattle upon their privacy he passed round behind his Uncle's chair and took the vacant place beside the girl. Glancing across the table his indifferent, half insolent gaze met that of Anthony Hawk, by no means indifferent. On the moment antagonism was born, so vital and robust on 'Tonio's part that, but for the master's warning as they descended the stairs, his vexed memory of the insolence upon the road might have flamed out as once already wrath had flamed that night. So, for a long breath, sword and cudgel met, and again the cudgel gained the day. With a shrug and a lifting of the brows Faldora turned to his cousin, but with Count Ascanio just beyond her across the angle of the table no impertinent jest at 'Tonio's expense was possible.

Some men and many women have the double faculty of watchful observance, while listening with comprehend-

ing intelligence. In the woman it is one of those gifts of quicker wit which go far to compensate for physical weakness: with Fieravanti the power had developed through the dual working of the mind directing the delicate handling of his tools even while he talked on other matters with his *scarpellini*. To the cheating gamester, the cogger of dice, he gave no second thought: to denounce the cheat was not the duty of a passing guest: but losing no word of Count Ascanio's elaborate demonstration, his speculation pondered Luca Melone's unspoken dissatisfaction with the Magdalene and its association with the girl facing him. That there was an association he had no doubt, else would His Grandeur not have been at once so mysterious and so insistent.

But the passionless, unresponsive indifference taught him nothing. Upon this far-off cousin, whose manner and air were more than cousinly, she smiled with no greater warmth than on the travelling merchants thrust upon the Casa's hospitality by the Custom; almost, Fieravanti thought, there was the same distaste as had countered Faldora's blunt regret at the silence of his empty stairs. What were the words? "Small feet of my name?" Of my name! Not simply small feet, but children who would be Faldoras to follow a Faldora!

On the instant Fieravanti understood and his heart checked a beat as he remembered Ordelaffi's flaring lights, and saw again the fierce passion of the cheating dicer as he shook a defiant hand from the door before it closed behind his dishonour. In the same instant, too, he knew himself in the pinch of a cleft stick. Unconsciously Luca Melone had thrust him into a position of almost intolerable difficulty. Which way lay that paramount duty from whose fulfilment a man may not shrink? Should he speak or should he forbear? Should he enlighten this Grand Seigneur and very noble-hearted gentleman whose dis-

course upon Arzano and Arzano's defences was beating upon his brain with the hurtful racking of some stridency which mauls raw nerves to the limit of endurance, or should he hold his peace, and pass out of their lives with the morning, according to the custom of the Custom? If he spoke——

"You, Ser Marco, who are so deeply versed in the science of fortification, will understand that in the case of a city perched, as Arzano is, upon a hill-top which slopes in all directions it is most desirable that the ditch beyond the outer wall——"

The full, strong voice, firm and clear as in the days of hot youth, held upon its serene way as undreaming of the conflict in the brain of the listener as of the ruin which hung, imminent, above the future of his House. What if he spoke, Fieravanti asked himself, what if he said, Ask Girolamo Ordelaffi who was that cogger of dice flung out of the Castello two nights ago, disgraced and a cheat? Would the children whose small feet were to make glad the echoes of the silent stairs be small feet of the ancient name at all; or would Carlo Faldora, last of his race though he was and sole channel by which that honoured name could be handed down the ages, be thrust from the doors as Ordelaffi had thrust him? It was a foolish question. Count Ascanio had himself answered it within the past half hour—if his honour was lost, or the honour of his name, life, too, might go with the losing. Better an end to Faldora than hand down the ancient name through tainted blood. Well, then, should he speak?

Before he answered the question there was another besides Count Ascanio to be considered: what would such a woman as Lucia Faldora say to the cheating dicer? That depended on whether she loved him and how. God be thanked, good women have an infinity of forgiveness—some of them. Was Lucia Faldora one of such? A

womanly woman? Yes! Wipe the pride from the cold face, warm that coldness, stir to active life the soul in the stone and find—What? A Saint? Yes and No! Not a saint as yet but a saint in the germ. It was one of Fieravanti's beliefs that every woman is a saint in the germ: not in saintly meekness, perhaps, but a possible and greater saint in ungrudging and devoted self-sacrifice: not a patient Griselda, not a Sant' Agnese, but an Elizabeth of Hungary or a Santa Maura. Such an one Lucia Faldora might surely prove: had not Piero Buti said she was good to the poor?

And what would the love of a strong-natured, deep-hearted woman say to the cheat who pled an answering love as deep-hearted as her own? Would she not say, Love is of God, love is His divine gift, love is His clearest and surest revelation of Himself. So realising, so believing, would she not face the world at the cheat's side, her hand in his, let scorn who might, and by her love win him back to honour? A miracle, that, surely? Yes, but is it not within the power of love to work miracles provided——

"Your close attention one moment, Signor Fieravanti." There was a hint of offence in Faldora's voice and Fieravanti woke to the knowledge that his dual faculty had failed him: absorbed in his most urgent problem it had not served its two masters equally well. "The true heart of such a town as Arzano is its citadel: it is like a man's honour: so long as that holds fast there is safety, let threaten what will, lose it and all is lost. Therefore——"

But Fieravanti had recovered grip of himself. His eyes negligently across the table like those of a man whose thought is far off—in Arzano, for instance, mapping out that citadel which should be to the safety of the Duke what his honour was to his reputation—he searched Carlo Faldora's face line by line while, stooping towards his

host, he proved his close attention by a nodded assent, a dropped phrase, a little endorsing gesture of the hand. For there, in Carlo Faldora's face, he must find the answer to his question, would such a woman love such a man well enough to count the world well lost for his sake?

And the face? Setting his prejudice aside Fieravanti told himself that it was a comely face—more, a handsome face, gay and smiling, as debonair as if there were no such things as cogged dice lying broken in Forli, and the honour of a man and the fame of an ancient name broken with them. But was it a face that might catch and hold a woman's love, the love of a good woman, that is? Yes, perhaps, since good women do not always see deeper than the skin, or there would be fewer sore hearts in the world. Carlo Faldora's comeliness was certainly skin deep. And deeper? What lay beyond the padding of the comely flesh? Fieravanti's brows narrowed to a frown. Self, the thing he is, writes its story on every man's face though not all can read it. Would she see, as he saw, the cruel hardness of the now laughing mouth, the arrogant obstinacy of the squared chin, the calculating coldness lying behind the gay smile of the supercilious eyes? Would she read and understand the story of the lines, faint as yet but deepening without a doubt, which the evil beloved of Carlo Faldora's soul was tracing upon forehead and temple? Would she recognise——

Suddenly Fieravanti brushed all such closeness of analysis aside; it counted for nothing in a discovery he had made. Clearly Carlo Faldora, let him pay court as he might, had no love for his cousin: love for what she would bring him, perhaps, love for the full purse which would make cogged dice needless and a folly, but no love which set her apart as the one dear woman out of all the world,

for whose sake and for whose love that world itself would be well lost!

No! There was no such love! The gaiety was a pretence, the smile a mask: he was playing his part for pay as any hired lover upon a stage might play it, any mediocre actor whose spirit was untouched by the mimic passion. As in Forli so now, the dice were cogged and the breaking of them would be the breaking of a woman's heart if the pretence deceived her. But would the pretence cheat such a woman as the maker of saints judged Lucia Faldora to be? No! Not for an hour!

That she did not see Carlo Faldora as Fieravanti saw him was probable. How could she, lacking his experience and knowledge of the greater world? But that other shield of defence which nature sets in a woman's armoury, intuition, was sufficient to guard her against such feints as those with which Faldora pressed his cause. If she yielded it would be for two reasons—the citadel his pretence sought to carry was empty; Lucia Faldora had given love to no man: and because, being thus empty of heart, she was content to fill the void with Count Ascanio's desire for the small feet of his name. What then? Being unloving what would Lucia Faldora say to the loveless lover and proven cogger of dice? Shifting his gaze to her face their eyes met and on the instant she broke without scruple into both Count Ascanio's homily upon the supreme value of citadels and Carlo Faldora's feint assault upon her own.

"Signor Fieravanti, what did you mean when you said the Keepers of the Custom might burn His Grandeur's house over his head?"

"But," protested Fieravanti with mock gravity, "is that not also a custom?"

"A custom? To burn roofs? How? Where? Why."

"How? With complete thoroughness, no doubt! Where? Here on the hills, or wheresoever the hills are offended! Why? For daring to interfere with the appointed lottery of the knockers. And Brettinoro believes both how, where and why. As a jest I asked the urchins gathered round the pillar which knocker would give us soft beds. But they said they dared not answer and said it in a whisper, adding that if any spoke his house would surely burn that night."

"But that is different, surely you see that that is different?" It was Count Ascanio, misreading Fieravanti's mock gravity, who made the protest, while all down the table there was a listening silence. "Do you not see that if they took upon themselves to advise there would be an end to the Custom?"

"To which, because of your advice, Arzano will owe much and I more. What site in Arzano would you choose for the citadel?"

But for her own reasons Lucia Faldora was not minded to let the table slip back into its old grouping. She might marry her cousin in order that the old name should continue through the direct line, but she had no taste for his mock philandering. Had his egotism but guessed it, the pressing of his suit was his greatest danger: it revolted her. Now she turned to 'Tonio.

"Burn roofs? Does Forli think that to burn roofs is the pastime of hill-folk?"

"It is not what Forli thinks but what the hill-folk fear," answered Hawk bluntly. "All day the terror of it has been dinned into our ears. First it was Lippo——"

"Forget Lippo," said Fieravanti sharply. "Three times over I have told you we have nothing to do with Lippo. Regarding the citadel, Count Ascanio——"

But Faldora was leaning forward across the table, his

eyes on 'Tonio and the citadel forgotten. "Lippo? Ser Antonio, what of Lippo and the burning of roofs?"

"This, Signor; had not humble hill-folk half way from Castel-Cavo warned us against Lippo at the risk, as they believed, of their lives, there would have been no Custom of Brettinoro for us to-night?"

"Because of Lippo?" Faldora's lean face had flushed passionately red beneath its tan of sun and wind, the mouth hard, the eyes fierce as only old eyes can be. "No interferences if you please; this touches our honour," and with a gesture not to be denied he put aside Fieravanti when he would have spoken. "What of Lippo, Messer Hawk?"

If there had been silence before, now there was profound stillness. From the lowest servitor to Ascanio Faldora all were leaning inward across the table, their eyes on the Englishman. Even Carlo Faldora had lost his gay indifference. The mask had dropped; his stare at 'Tonio was fiercer even than Count Ascanio's: had the girl glanced at him she must have seen the hard lines of the cruel mouth which Fieravanti had assumed even through its repose. Here, surely, was a stirring of the old blood? If Lippo and Lippo's band touched the honour of Faldora to its hurt, then, in the contradiction of human nature, the cogger of dice was not too deeply sunk in his own dishonour to defend and avenge it.

"Just this, signor. But for a warning on the road we must have fallen into Lippo's trap and——"

"And but for courage and loyal love it might have gone hard with us." To ease the tension Fiervanti intervened. "It was an English cudgel, Illustrissmo, that won us a clear road."

"A warning?" said Carlo, his eyes still on 'Tonio. "Who warned you?"

"Does that matter?" It was Fieravanti who replied.

"Um—to give them thanks."

But the sculptor shook his head. "Better not. The poor souls go in terror of Lippo's revenge. A cruel devil, they called him: to bring his vengeance on their heads would be poor payment for bite and sup."

"You ate with them? Good!" and Carlo Faldora sat back in his chair like a man whose curiosity is satisfied.

But as his passion cooled Count Ascanio's quickened. "Lippo—Lippo—Lippo!" he said between set teeth, beating the table with his fist at every repetition. "Let Lippo take heed to himself! There was a time when the justice of Faldora should have hung him before this and, by God! it would! But Faldora is no longer Faldora. Half Romagna is in fief to Rome and Faldora shrunk to a petty lordship. The safety of the roads is the Church's care, the Church—no offence, Father, you know I speak nothing but the truth—the Church that stands in Faldora's place and of more like him, draining our revenues and leaving our highways to the mercy of Lippo and his like. For that, let the Church see to her own duty; I shall make no move unless touched. But let this Lippo beware; if he lays so much as a finger on a guest of Faldora's he'll hang, Church or no Church; to that I set my oath." Still leaning forward, clenched fist on table, he stared up and down the lines of faces upon either side, stared with a fierce challenge which said, plain as words, "Do you hear? Heed, then, on your life." And Carlo Faldora answered while the Church, in the persons of the two clerics, sat discreetly silent.

"The pity of it is, my lord and uncle, that this rogue Lippo cannot hear your warning that he may lay it to heart."

"Are you the fool or am I?" retorted Faldora tartly.

"I would lay a wager that within four and twenty hours Lippo will have heard: let him take heed."

"Then so much the better for you, signors, both, but specially for the cudgel-bearer. Faith of Faldora! what a weapon!"

"It was good enough for a thief and maybe for a thief's betters," answered Hawk grimly, a reply which wakened Fieravanti's problem afresh. He knew against whom the hint was levelled, but was less sure that young Faldora was greatly better than the open thief.

But even while his doubts swayed between silence and "Enquire of Ordelaffi," his host laid them.

"So much the better, do you say, Carlo? So much the worse for Lippo if he touches any guest of Faldora, say I. And, Ser Marco, a guest you are and a guest I trust you will be again before long. The old war-horse has pricked his ears at sound of the trumpet! Return from Arzano by way of Brettinoro I beg of you, and, unless the Duke objects, tell me your recommendations. Remember, you have no longer need to hammer on a stone for a welcome, therefore ride straight to the Casa. Father, is supper ended? A grace, then, if you please." But, the Latin being said and while all stood, he looked up and down the table once more. "Let Lippo beware how he touches the honour of Faldora!"

CHAPTER IX

HAWK MEETS AN OLD FRIEND

SEATED in the saddle the next morning, his host's hand in his, Fieravanti thanked God silently that there was now no need to say, If Lippo threatened the honour of Faldora, ask Ordelaffi whether there is not another who has trampled it into the very mud! No; it would be time enough to speak when he returned from Arzano in a month or less. Nor might there be need to break silence at all. Long before then the sordid story must surely have spread to Brettinoro, and silence be a virtue.

There Fieravanti forgot four things—that there was little intercourse between the hill and the valley; that Ordelaffi's injunctions to silence would be strict lest the reputation of his Court should suffer; that there were few travellers from Forli by way of Brettinoro and that, not uncommonly, the last to hear such a tale were those most concerned: he would be a bold man who, for mere gossip, would say to Ascanio Faldora, Your nephew and heir is a cheat! But upon these four things the cheat counted, and to them he added a fifth—few men in Romagna had his skill in sword-play.

That Carlo Faldora did not make a fifth with Tribalda at the gate of the Casa was also a relief. Not easily could Fieravanti have taken, in seeming friendliness, the hand of the man he might yet have to denounce. But there he need not have fretted through anticipation. Because of the folly of the Custom young Faldora might break

bread with a hewer of marble, and for the same reason his uncle speed the guest in courtesy, but Carlo touched hands only with his equal; amongst these he did not count the maker of saints, still less Anthony Hawk the cudgel bearer!

Nor was Lucia Faldora one of the group at the Casa gate. It was not her habit to bid farewell to chance comers through the Custom, and not even the interest roused by the maker of saints, whose fame was steadily spreading through Italy, could induce her to vary her practice.

But being very much of a woman and no saint as yet, curiosity drew her to one of those flanking turrets which Fieravanti had noted through the falling dusk. From its battlemented roof the open gate stood in full view, and there, as she leaned across the wall, a scarf bound wimple-fashion over her hair against the chill of the March morning, Father Bernardo found her.

For more than thirty years he had served God and Faldora faithfully and fearlessly out of a simple heart, never forgetting that love is the fulfilling of the law and that even for love there is a law which must be fulfilled. Through these thirty years he had seen birth and death, the amaranth and the asphodel, the coming of life and its passing: had shared its gladness with childhood, its sorrows with age; had seen youth bud to its flower and the flower fade while as yet there was no fruit; had watched with sorrowing eyes of sympathy the stripping of the ancient stock to its one last shoot. And because of all these things, the coming of babes in their helplessness and the passing of men in their strength, with all the linked joys and griefs which lay between, he had grown into the life of the Casa as a graft grows with the life of the tree whose sap is its vigour. Always the priest of God, yet more and more the friend of those to whom he ministered, as God's priest should be, reverence for his office and trust in the

man had so grown up side by side that it was to the friend, rather than to the confessor, that the secrets and troubles of both Count Ascanio and Lucia Faldora were confided. Between him and the girl the bonds of mutual affection were particularly strong. Now, as he leaned across the wall at her side, she laid a familiar hand on his shoulder.

"The statue of Our Lady in San Giovanni is very beautiful, Father."

The priest nodded thoughtfully. "Those who call him a maker of saints speak more truly than they know. It is like this: Our clods of peasants—I do not speak in contempt but as I find them—need to have their imaginations fired through the eye. The marble lifts their thoughts, and so they understand us better when we preach the mercy of God. A wise man, His Grandeur."

"Yes—perhaps: simple and lovable, I thought, but I saw no great wisdom."

"Bread is simple, yet we live by it, and the simplest wisdom is the truest, for then even fools can understand."

The girl laughed. "Then am I worse than a fool, for I fail to see His Grandeur's special wisdom."

"In sending Marco Fieravanti to Faldora: Brettinoro, too, has need of one saint to make many. There! the farewells are said! Help me in this, my daughter: before Marco Fieravanti returns help me to win the Count's consent to a statue for the Casa's chapel."

"But——" On the word she paused. Fieravanti, turning to wave a final salute to his host had caught sight of the two outlined against the sky as they leaned across the turret wall; snatching off his hat he sat bareheaded. The priest alone responded.

"But?" he repeated as, unstirring and unstirred, she looked silently down into the depths.

"That would mean months at the casa for both him and his *scarpellino*. Where his work is he must be."

"That, too, might be wise."

At the dry significance in the voice she turned, but his gaze, tender, kindly, wistful, was bent downwards and, half involuntarily, she followed it. Fieravanti still sat bareheaded; he had checked his horse and the clear morning sun picked out the upturned face as with a wizard's brush, warming the lights in the brown of the chestnut hair to a ruddy gold.

"There," said Bernardo, "is, I think, not only a man but a good man; no saint like those he carves for our clods, but a man of warm blood who will never swerve a hairsbreadth from his conscience for fear or favour, love or hate: a man for whom there is but one law—the highest as he sees it: might not our Carlo have need of such? Oh, do not mistake; I must be honest with you; it is my own need, or my people's, that I am thinking of first of all, not Carlo's. But, daughter," and that he so spoke, calling her daughter and not using the Lucia of long familiar custom, was a sure testimony that he was deeply in earnest, "we know our Carlo—a little. Some men learn from priests—not Carlo: some men learn from good women—not Carlo, I think: some men learn from men stronger than themselves—Carlo? Yes, perhaps, if it is a strength which leads, not drives. Bid him farewell, Lucia: we may have need of him."

Obediently, if mechanically, the girl waved a hand downward and outwards; in response Fieravanti bowed and rode on. The dry significance she had vaguely understood. Towards this marriage Father Bernardo was neutral, sympathising with Count Ascanio's natural desire that the old name should live where the old name had lived so long, but recognising that on the girl's part there was indifference, almost, he feared at times, distaste.

But distaste in itself was no objection in an age which held that women were almost as much the chattels of

barter as any beast of the field: nor, to the priest in whom the man's love for the woman had never stirred, did a loveless marriage seem a hardship, much less a sin against nature. Meanwhile, to the girl's indifference the coming of Marco Fieravanti could be no intrusion: it might, his significance hinted, even be a relief, and through diversion of thought prevent distaste from taking too deep a root. After marriage—well, after marriage children would come and small feet would waken happy echoes in empty hearts as well as upon empty stairs.

As to Fieravanti's influence upon Carlo Faldora, that was an afterthought honestly spoken. Propinquity is a great force whose unobtrusive power is not always recognised; if evil is so readily absorbed through association why not good? And it was his firm conviction, both as priest and man, that the maker of a soul of goodness in others must himself be good.

Until the horsemen had disappeared from sight the girl kept silence, then:

"Carlo? So far as Carlo is concerned you will fail; he will never learn from a half peasant like this Marco Fieravanti," she said, but whether the hardly conscious contempt was for the half-peasant or Carlo was uncertain. "Let your maker of saints come if you will. He interests my grandfather, and that Brettinoro is a village of clods is true enough."

But there was at least one spark of the divine in its cloddishness. Scarcely had Fieravanti rounded the sharp incline descending to the village when a small figure in patched rags burst from the concealment of a wayside bush, where it had long lain in wait, and raced towards him, one hand beckoning him to halt, the other clenched as deeply in the pocket as when it had disappeared into the growing dusk of the night before. Almost the pinched

face looked pitifully smaller as Piero panted and stammered by the sculptor's stirrup-leather, too out of breath and too excited to be coherent.

"Signor, there was a mistake—at least, the mother thinks that in the dark—Signor, it was gold you gave me, not silver, and—and—here it is." There were tears in the eyes and a half whimpered sob in the eager voice as he fetched the doubled fist from the depths of the pocket and held out a tiny bundle, neatly folded. Gold was too precious in Brettinoro not to be wrapped with care.

At the unconscious appeal of the brimming eyes and quivering mouth Fieravanti felt the moisture blur his own gaze as he looked gravely down, too deeply moved to smile at the pathetic humour of the ragged figure fumbling at his boot, unknowing that it fumbled. Then with a gulp Piero controlled himself: if he cried outright the signor might misunderstand the tears, and that would vex the mother at home.

"Gold?" said Fieravanti. "Let me see?" Unfolding the tiny bundle he turned the coin out into his palm: here was heart's ease for a time and comfort to a sore spirit in the feeding of hungry mouths: yet for conscience sake the hungry mouths must go hungry. Wistfully the dark eyes of the lad, darker for their tears, followed the movement. "Gold? Why, so it is! And it was dark last night, and the mother thinks—yes, yes, I understand. Well, little son, that's soon mended; here is silver for it."

But at sight of the ten sols piece, though double his last night's expectation, the working of the mouth would not be controlled even by the little white teeth biting hard at the lip. We never know how high or how firmly founded have been our hopes until some jolt of a hard world tumbles them into ruins. Quickly, for the tension was strained to snapping, and tears, he knew, would be a

shame and a disgrace, scalding more than the eyes they burned, Fieravanti slipped the two coins into the cloth, twisted the folds into a hard knot and stooped.

"Here, little son; run home to the mother and thank God for her every day of your life; only, tell her that last night there was no mistake," then with a nod, his eyes shining behind their blur, he rode on. As to Piero, the tears had now come in earnest. To cry more than "Signor—Signor—Signor," as they flooded his white cheeks was beyond him.

"There is something to set against the Lippos of the world!" said Fieravanti as 'Tonio ranged alongside him. "When God made us he made nothing better or wiser than tears—they are a salve to all wounds, a soothing to sorrow, an ease to the joy that is half pain; through them we can look upon death and see the light behind the shadow; they blot out offences, they bind friendships, and for every fret of soul or spirit they have their balm: God be thanked for the mercy of tears; so long as they can fall no heart will break."

"Yes, signor, I suppose so," answered 'Tonio, not very relevantly. All through the farewells he had been preoccupied and unresponsive, sitting his horse apart. Now it was clear that the interlude which so moved Fieravanti had affected him not at all. "But touching that same Lippo, what was Giro doing in the Casa this morning?"

"Giro?" At the edge on the Englishman's voice Fieravanti came out of his exalted mood with a start. "Who is Giro?"

"Lippo's pick-purse whose head I broke yesterday."

"Giro? Yes, I remember now; he was certainly called Giro. But in the Casa this morning? That is not possible."

"Do you think I do not know my own handiwork?" answered 'Tonio with grim humour. "His head was as tight

in its bloodied cloth as the signorina's in her blue wimple as she leaned across the wall just now. I heard him say he fell on the road and, by the Lord, he spoke the truth there, though something else fell on him first. They called him Giro—Giro of the dogs."

"Giro, perhaps; but not Lippo's Giro: the name is common."

"Lippo's Giro without a doubt. It was not just his broken crown: broken crowns are common as Giros! nor that I knew his face, for I did not; but the hand he lifted to guard his skull against the cudgel had lost the little finger, and this Giro had lost the same finger of the same fist."

"Lippo's Giro in the Casa? What was he doing there?"

"Asking for that courteous gentleman who drives better folk than himself off the road and then cries, Clear the way, cattle! By Saint Dunstan, but some day——"

"Did you challenge him—Giro, I mean?"

Hawk smiled sourly. "No, signor, not after your last night's tongue-trouncing. Besides, we come back in a month and by Saint Dunstan, who took the devil by the nose——"

"He was asking for Carlo Faldora, you say?"

"Yes, signor; and not only asking but finding. They rode off together. There's a lover for you! He returns from Forli only yesterday and instead of being up in the turret with his lady, just the two together, he leaves her to a priest and rides off, the devil knows best where, with Lippo's Giro! Small wonder she turned her shoulder on him last night! I doubt if she will shed many tears when there is another head broken—as there will be, God giving me life."

"Leave the signora out of it, 'Tonio. The private affairs of the Casa are nothing to us. This Giro, did you ask who he was?"

"Yes, signor. We were all in the stables while the horses were a-saddling. When he had gone off with our civil gentleman I said, Who's this, who finds the road harder than his skull? and they told me he was a peasant who worked a far-off vineyard belonging to the Casa."

"And what did you say?"

"That he rode well for a peasant. But they explained that—the young signor sends him here and there on the business of the Casa."

"So your question is answered and we know what Lippo's Giro was doing there this morning! No doubt he lives a double life; is honest with Faldora for an honest wage and thieves between times with Lippo."

"Let me get Brother Staff well home on the thievish half of his skull and God pity his honesty!" said 'Tonio.

But Fieravanti rode on his way in silence, a second perplexity rubbing shoulders with the first. On his return should he hint to Carlo Faldora that more than he played the game of life with cogged dice? That it could be birds of a feather fulfilling the proverb was impossible.

CHAPTER X

IN THE CASA GARDEN

Of Fieravanti's stay in Arzano there are only two things to be said—Count Ascanio's shrewd guess was justified: the Duke's thoughts turned to the strengthening of the city and not to the edifying, or building up, of the Church; nor would any Venus in stone have contented him. Therein he resembled Girolamo Ordelaffi and most others of his degree in that age. Also, he raised no objection to gratifying Faldora's curiosity.

"What harm?" he said when Fieravanti put the question. "It is true that in '86 he and Urbino sacked the city: I was then in the cradle, or not long out of it, and owe him no grudge. Now the old dog has grown too dull in the teeth to bite, so I say again, What harm?"

"There is a young dog—Carlo."

"And the Count might pass on our plan?" Arzano shook his head. "You do not know Ascanio Faldora! A chivalrous gentleman to his tallest inch, were he to attempt '86 again he would die under our walls rather than batter a breach through knowledge learned in friendliness. As to Carlo, a peasant's roof or a woman's good name will see all the sacking he will lay hand to in this world!"

"A coward, Your Magnificence?"

"Coward? No! A rat is no coward, but it does not fight in the open."

"And yet rats have pulled down houses before now?"

"Aye—the houses they live in. As to my new walls and ditches, tell old Ascanio what you please, Ser Marco."

But even with Ascanio Faldora's hints to guide him, and they were drawn on freely—only the small-minded man, unsure of himself, is afraid openly to borrow another's brains—April had passed and May lay warm on the hills before Fieravanti was free to quit Arzano. With untired horses under them and the road mostly down hill it was a short day's journey to Brettinoro, nor, this time, was there any delay at the pillar of the Custom.

With the sun still high the Casa's great gate stood wide when Fieravanti and English Anthony drew rein before it. Tribalda himself came out to offer a widely different welcome from that which had greeted them when under Piero's guidance. Clearly he had his orders. But apart from all orders his soldier's heart had gone frankly out to this maker of saints who knew so well the science of grim defence. For half Italy war was the business of life, for the other half the terror: here was a man from whom even great captains might learn one side of their trade.

"Three weeks we have looked for you and the Count's temper is worn thin with waiting! He began to fear Arzano was curmudgeon and you had returned by the other road. Now that he has you he'll squeeze you dry as a last year's orange."

"The orange is of his own filling, so let him squeeze and welcome. There's no need to ring the bell; 'Tonio knows his way to the stables."

But Giuseppe, who had arrived on the scene, would listen to no such suggestion: the very hint of it was an offence. "By your leave, signors, by your leave. Let lackeys do lackeys' work. God He knows there are enough to serve the guests of the Casa. This way, signors."

But Fieravanti paused, his hand in Tribalda's. "The Count is well?"

"Fretted, I think. Lippo, of whom you know something, has given trouble."

"Lippo? There's work for young blood. Why does Carlo Faldora not clear out that nest of thieves?"

"Better not ask that at supper," answered Tribalda drily.

"Come, signors, come," called Giuseppe impatiently and, recognising that he stood on doubtful ground, Fieravanti obeyed.

Without doubt the major-domo also had his orders, but while he obeyed to the letter he rebelled in spirit. Marco Fieravanti? Who was Marco Fieravanti to be received as a guest of the Casa, not a guest through the chance of the Custom but a guest of Faldora as if he called himself Colonna, Orsini, or even Ordelaffi? In secret Giuseppe despised Ordelaffi, an upstart who had risen as Faldora had fallen. But Fieravanti? Who in all the great world ever before heard of a Fieravanti? Discourteous? No! Giuseppi owed too great a respect to the bread he ate to be discourteous to Faldora's guests, however simple, but as the sculptor followed the major-domo a line or two from the great poem of Durante, or Dante Alighieri, which, newly written and as yet known only in fragments, was slowly gripping men's imaginations never to slacken hold to the world's end, rose to his memory,

Thou shalt have proof
How hard a road the going down and up another's stairs.

Had the bitter heart of the exile, he wondered, cried out against his own experiences when he put these words into the mouth of Cacciaguida?

"This way, signors," said Giuseppi, and Fieravanti found himself housed in strange quarters: not such, perhaps, as would have been allotted to a Colonna but far removed from what was held sufficient for travelling merchants.

Stuff hangings covered the lower courses of the walls, a padded chair stood in the corner beyond the wide-mouthed hearth, two or three rugs were spread upon the floor of composite mosaic work. With the curt intimation that they would be informed when supper was ready to be served the major-domo left them.

But Fieravanti did not relish remaining behind closed doors: much might have happened in their weeks of absence which it was their wisdom to know lest ignorance should blunder into offence or, still worse, make mischief. So presently he bade 'Tonio find the stables; solicitude as to how their horses had borne the day's journey was excuse enough.

"Ask after this Giro, not as Lippo's Giro but Giro of the broken head. Do your questioning cautiously lest you stir a wasp's nest."

'Tonio grinned. "He who stirs up a wasp's nest with his tongue is likely to talk little thereafter."

"So little that he might never talk at all," answered Fieravanti drily. "Therefore be watchful."

When in turn he retraced the way they had come, pausing now by a suit of damascened armour from Saint Bernard's Crusade, now to examine a painted Sicilian vase or an Etruscan lamp of pierced brass work, a sudden sense of great stillness fell upon him and he understood Ascanio Faldora's longing that small feet and eager young voices should set the echoes flying. Though, as Giuseppe had said, there were servitors enough they moved softly, their numbers lost in the dimness of the long aisles: only up the broad staircase was there any sound of life, a

murmur from the great hall, subdued by distance. In the greyness, and at its best of daylight the corridors and vaulted hollow of the stairs were grey to gloom, so narrow were the windows, the Casa seemed a habitation of quiet ghosts rather than of men and women whose blood ran hot in their veins.

Young feet? Eager small voices? How they would banish the ghosts of an outworn past and set the heart of the present a-beating! Slowly descending the stairs Fieravanti found himself treading softly lest his man's feet should waken echoes which, reaching Ascanio Faldora's ears, might stir more deeply those poignant memories of death and loss, which now only a babe's voice could comfort. God send him the consolation of small hands in his before he died! Comfort? Consolation? Surely to sorrowful old age there is no such sacring as the touch of innocent, soft lips?

And with that thought stirring his heart to sympathy Fieravanti passed through an open door into the mellow glory of May sunshine flooding a garden flecked with shadows, to find Lucia Faldora, tall in cool lawn, where the shadows fell thickest. As he saw her a quaint whimsy seized him—shadowed? Yes! but the shadows cast by sunshine are of God's making and not man's!

Hearing his footfall she came to meet him. If some little curiosity stirred her—the man was famous, or would be some day—it was not apparent; her greeting was gravely courteous and nothing more.

"My grandfather has almost despaired, Ser Fieravanti."

"Count Ascanio is more than kind——"

"To himself," she interrupted with a laugh. "You brought a new interest into his life."

"But he has interests enough in Faldora surely—and the hope of more?"

Instantly her face hardened: this peasant sculptor forgot his place and presumed. Rebuke and distaste were alike in her changed voice as she answered,

"The hope of hearing how you have settled Arzano's defence? Yes. Has the Duke given his consent?"

"Without reserve."

"Then, in that case you will be very welcome."

The acid in the tone bit deeper than the words and Fieravanti blamed himself bitterly. Fresh from the appealing silences of the great stairway he had forgotten Carlo Faldora and his cheating dice. Impulsively, and misreading the pride in which her resentment was rooted, he decided to speak a warning as plainly as he dared. To Ascanio Faldora he might, if driven, say bluntly, "The man is no better than a thief; ask Ordelaffi," but scarcely to the woman by whose side he walked. Not because she was Lucia Faldora, but in his reverence for all women Fieravanti disliked bringing men's vices too near lest the very knowledge of them should stain or coarsen.

"Signora, I am, as you know, of Forli. In Forli——" he hesitated choosing his words, "All men do not speak well of—of—Carlo Faldora."

"No?" There was a little curling smile on her lip as she looked up at him. "But, perhaps in Forli men do not always speak well of their hosts?"

"You are wrong: in this case it is the host who does not speak well of his guest."

"We also, I think. Were the roads from Arzano pleasant, Signor Fieravanti?"

"Signorina, I beg you to believe that though I am a guest——"

"Signor, but that my grandfather has a proposal to make to you in the way of your trade I would say I hope you will find the road to Forli pleasant to-morrow. My cousin is—my cousin. As to Forli, I am not curious."

"If your cousin is to remain your cousin I have nothing more to say, but——"

She paused in her slow walk, turning on him with the vexed coldness of outraged pride. "Signor Fieravanti, it is intolerable that you should meddle with our private affairs."

In their wanderings they had passed from under the trees and entered an open grassy space where stood an ancient sundial; by its side her pause had halted them. Stooping, to gain time to arrange his thoughts, Fieravanti read the motto and laid a finger on the graven words.

"On me and on all
Shadows must fall,"

he quoted.

"Signorina, my hope was to keep you longer in the sunshine: the only shadows which can truly blight are those of our own making: all others pass. Yes, the road from Arzano was pleasant, but not more pleasant than I hope to find the hills behind Brettinoro and Forli—Lippo permitting!"

"Oh, Lippo!" she cried, grasping willingly enough at the change of subject. "Surely if His Holiness knew of Lippo's violence he would sweep the roads clear of him!"

"Rome is far off! Should not those nearer do the sweeping?"

"You mean my grandfather? And so he will if Lippo so much as touches the honour of Faldora."

"And yet, signorina, when I, three minutes back, pled for the honour of Faldora you whipped me with whips of scorn. It is true you are Lucia Faldora and I only Marco Fieravanti, but, by the God who made us both, it was not to your credit either as a Faldora or a woman so to scourge the man whose sole thought was to interpose between you and a bitter repentance. Carlo Faldora—your pardon, your pardon, let me finish; this time there will be no

offence—what is Carlo Faldora to me that I should care how he plays the rake and fool and worse down in Forli? If you know and are content, if you condone, if your eyes are open—but there! What is Lucia Faldora to me either! Signorina, most humbly I ask your pardon: how could a Faldora touch the honour of Faldora! Impossible! That is left to the Lippos of the world!"

Again he had spoken on an impulse. It was, perhaps, just this obedience to impulse which went to the making of his saints, for is not all inspiration by way of impulse? Only, if the impulse failed to find the right expression in the clay he could mould it out and begin afresh; but words, once spoken, were like the final stroke of his chisel. Now, his ruddy fairness flushing a little with the ironic passion which shook him, he turned half from her and stood looking out across the expanse of the garden. Unconsciously, as men will in righteous anger or indignation, he had drawn his height to its fullest, had thrown back his head and squared his shoulders as if to meet and repel attack. In the thick chestnut hair and curling russet beard the westering sun lit fire, and though, because of the shifted face, the girl could not see his eyes she had little doubt that they, too, were ablaze.

And she? As tense as he and as shaken, she stood in silence half a pace behind him striving to puzzle out what manner of man this was who dared thus let loose upon her both rebuke and contempt in such a flood. For they were both there—rebuke for the Faldora pride and contempt for the blindness that would not see and understand his simple honesty of purpose.

And so striving, her eyes searching the half turned face at leisure because, his thoughts elsewhere, he had no suspicion that she searched, she became aware that, whatever the spirit of the man might be, no Colonna or Orsini she had ever seen could match him for looks.

Surprise was her first emotion, astonishment that a man of the people who but for his genius might have been a peasant labouring in the fields, could be cast in so fine a mould. What was it he had said? God who made us both? Almost, she thought, he might have made them of the one lump!

There never was a woman yet, not even a possible saint in the making, who having looked thrice at a comely man was not willing to look a fourth time! And, without doubt Marco Fieravanti was not alone comely, but all unconscious of his own comeliness. And the spirit of the man? There, taking thought, she thrilled almost to a little shiver. If he had presumed he had been unconscious of offence, and surely willingness to offend is the true core of offence! Presumptuous? In whose cause had he presumed? Not in his own but in hers.

What he had urged with such hot contempt was true enough, what was Carlo to him that he should—meddle; that was her own word and now its use vexed her. Nor, naturally, was Lucia Faldora anything to him. How could she be, seeing she was Faldora and he Fieravanti? No; solely and only it was the woman he sought to defend, and was it not the part of a fine-souled man to defend the woman even at the risk of being misunderstood. Defend her from what? Not just from Carlo, but—the colour quickened in her cheeks as she, no child, guessed how such as Carlo Faldora passed his time in Forli, with the example of Ordelaffi and Amata Capponi before his eyes. But that he should so pass his time was not strange: rather—and the proud, sensitive mouth curved in contempt—it was the commonplace in men of his years and degree: so common that women—wives—were wise to shut their eyes and ears, especially when they neither loved nor were loved. Then the thought shook her, what manner of man was this who held such ways so greatly in reprobation

that he risked the loosing of her sharp tongue on his presumption? Peasants lived no cleaner than their betters, worse, rather, though with greater excuse. Moved to repentance she laid her hand upon his arm and at the touch he turned.

"Ser Marco, it was I who was wrong: do not punish my folly by refusing my grandfather's request."

"It had been better if I had gone direct to Count Ascanio. Shall I do so still, Signorina?"

"No," she answered after a moment's hesitation, her colour rising as her thoughts once more went back to Carlo Faldora and his pastimes in Forli. "It would make no difference in the end. I think," she added bitterly, "that with my grandfather nothing counts but that the name shall live."

"Nothing? Truly nothing?"

"Nothing," she repeated with growing emphasis and increased bitterness as his persistence forced the growing distaste for the future more clearly upon her.

"And you? Forgive me, Signorina, but are you not most concerned?"

"I? Have I not told you that the name comes first."

"Love comes first," said Fieravanti meaningly. "Signorina before God and man, love comes first."

For a moment the old resentment grew in her eyes as she faced him, but now it was rooted in a different soil. Did he think she was so little a woman that love counted for nothing? It was because there was no love that Carlo was—tolerable. Then resentment died; after all, if he was again presuming, was he not presuming for her sake? But that she might not betray herself she took refuge in jest.

"Oh, there are loves and loves. You, Ser Marco, do not you love your saints as they grow under your hand?"

Following her lead he laughed. "True, even when their

saintship evades me, as one evades me in Forli now. It is a Magdalene for His Grandeur whose mouth says Very good! though his eyes protest, I am not content! May I tell you a secret? It is because of the Magdalene and His Grandeur's discontent that I am in Brettinoro at all! Go to Brettinoro, said he, go to Count Ascanio Faldora and—and—find there what you need to make your saint perfect."

"Find it here? How?"

"No offence, Signorina—in you."

"In me? But——" She broke off, laughing: the tension was eased, Carlo Faldora forgotten. "And have you found it?"

With the smile gay in her eyes she turned to him, and he, his own eyes smiling though the mouth was grave, searched her face slowly for a full minute; then he shook his head.

"No! Nor do I know, nor can I guess, what is lacking. Not beauty," he said.

"No" she mocked, "since he sent you here to find it, whatever it is!"

"Oh," he retorted, "there is beauty and beauty as there are loves and loves. Beauty can be imagined, but this—this must be seen and caught upon the chisel."

"Perhaps it is saintship? Your Magdalene is still a woman!"

"And can a woman not be a saint?"

"And true woman? I doubt it! We are of the earth, we women, and—is this not your *scarpellino* who is coming?"

"Yes—'Tonio, my Englishman," and both fell silent. In these last fifteen minutes the barrier between them had gone down, and there is this to be said of barriers when they are built chiefly of pride, once down they never again bristle with repellence as at the first. Quite unadmitted

by either, 'Tonio was not so welcome as he would have been earlier when Carlo Faldora was in question. Then, seeing him hesitate, she beckoned.

"He has something to say to you, I think. May you find what is lacking in your Magdalene, Ser Marco; but if it be saintship do not look to me for help!" and with a smiling acknowledgment of Hawk's respect she disappeared down a shaded walk towards the Casa.

"It's about Giro, signor, his head is mended, he is here every few days, he and his dogs, snarling mongrels as ill-conditioned as their master, and always his business is with Carlo Faldora."

"That is natural since young Faldora acts for his uncle. Say nothing of that missing finger, 'Tonio: I shall speak when the time comes."

CHAPTER XI

FALDORA DRINKS A HEALTH

"You on my left as before, Ser Fieravanti, Messer Antonio beyond you. Father, a grace." Seating himself with the Amen Count Ascanio turned to the sculptor. "How soon before I would break my head against Arzano's defences—a year?"

"Less, I hope. And the Duke has given me full leave to explain the plans to you."

"But not to the whole table! Some day Carlo, here, may have a quarrel with Arzano, as I had twenty-nine years ago."

"And in such a case you would not give Signor Carlo the benefit of——"

"Knowledge entrusted to my honour? No, nor would he wish it," an assertion Fieravanti took leave to doubt. "To-morrow, when we are alone, you shall tell me as much or as little as you please."

"But, Illustrissimo, to-morrow I must be on the road to Forli."

"Having accomplished all you had in your mind when you left the city?" said the girl, smiling at a memory.

"Oh, Madonna, there is always something to grope for at the bottom of the pocket! Life without puzzles is a rut and whoso lives in a rut sees little of God's world."

"And you find God's world puzzling?"

"Being less wise than He—yes!"

"Puzzles?" sweeping aside the intrusion which he did not in the least understand Count Ascanio picked up his own thread. "I doubt not you found many in Arzano? Strange, but it is through men like you, no soldier, no fighter, that the arts of war advance."

"And other arts!" This time it was Carlo Faldora who intruded. He was smiling, but it was not a smile which made his handsome face the pleasanter. "Sculpture, for instance. Fifty years ago there was no Fieravanti."

"And more than twenty times fifty years ago there was a Praxiteles. I do not see the advance," said Fieravanti.

"No advance, when after a Praxiteles there is a Fieravanti? Perhaps, then, it is a reproduction? The world regaining a greatness lost—how long ago, did you say? It is my belief, if Father Bernardo will not burn me as a heretic for saying so, that great souls never die. They only sleep: Praxiteles—Fieravanti."

"It would be better," answered Fieravanti drily, "if some souls, not great, never lived at all. The world would be the sweeter for the want of them! That, Father, I hope is no heresy?"

"And safer as well as sweeter!" Carlo Faldora's smile was even less pleasant as the eyes of the two men held each other in mutual antagonism and distaste across the table. "Be wise as well as great and do not forget the safety, Messer Fieravanti. Such souls are best let go their own way—Lippo for example."

Ignoring the antagonism, and the malicious will to be offensive, Fieravanti thought he saw an opportunity to hint his warning, not, let it be said, for Carlo Faldora's sake.

"Lippo? There are others as well as Lippo. That jackal of his for instance, whose head 'Tonio broke. The loss of a little finger from the left hand marks him."

"Oh, that?" Carlo Faldora was contemptuously indif-

ferent. "So many rogues of peasants steal our sheep that a maimed hand counts for nothing. Would you hang a man for hunger? Why our good Giro is maimed."

"And Giro was the name of Lippo's jackal."

"Giro?" Carlo Faldora stared in angry challenge across the table an instant, then shrugged his shoulders with a laugh. "Giro?" he repeated in a new contempt, "but you, of all men, should know that among our peasants Giros are as common as—as—Marcos!"

"And your Giro," said 'Tonio, the trembling rage in his voice not over well controlled, "Your Giro, I say, had his head in a cloth the day after I broke the skull of Lippo's jackal."

"Giro is a faithful servant; let Giro be lest you get your own head broken, Messer Antonio," said Count Ascanio testily. "Signor Fieravanti, now that you are done with Aranzo Father Bernardo has a proposal to make in the way of your trade. I say nothing but this, it has my sanction."

"Praxiteles redivivus," murmured Carlo, as if to himself. But though he was again smiling his hand so shook that the wine he lifted to his lips was slopped upon the table.

From beyond him Father Bernardo leaned forward. All through supper he had been as unsettled in nerve as Carlo Faldora now showed himself. The request he had to make lay very near his heart, and minute by minute he had seen consent grow less and less probable because of the studied discourtesy levelled at the sculptor.

Better than any at the table he knew that Marco Fieravanti would undertake no work he did not find congenial. He guessed, too, that unless the artist soul in the man was fired by the subject he would reject the proposal. If his enthusiasm was unaroused the inspiration which is essential to good work, and without whose stimulus the

best in the worker is not stirred into action, would be lacking: no spirit would breathe upon the dry bones of a dull imagination and bid them live.

Nor had he any great promise of support to lend force to his request: Count Ascanio was indifferent, the proposal, as he had said, had his sanction, but beyond that he would not go; Carlo Faldora was openly, aggressively and insolently hostile; Lucia had certainly persuaded her grandfather to grant his sanction, but without enthusiasm. Yet now, before Father Bernardo, trembling fearful of a courteous refusal, could put his plea into words Lucia Faldora smoothed the way for him.

"Ser Marco, remember the sundial and that all is not well with your dear Magdalene."

"His dear Magdalene?" Carlo Faldora set down the glass hastily as he turned to the girl with a fine pretence of anger. "What? Has he dared to abuse my uncle's hospitality with talk of Magdalenes, and to you?"

"Oh," she answered, "his Magdalenes and yours are not of the one flesh! Remember, Ser Marco, and think before you decide."

"That was a bad throw, Signor Carlo. You should know your dice better," said Fieravanti, while down the table Anthony Hawk laughed as young Faldora would have laughed in a like case, that is to say with careful insolence. "Signorina, I am never likely to forget. Now, Father, what is your proposal?"

"Ser Marco, you know, no man better, that one saint makes many. What is true of warm flesh and blood is true also of cold stone, and it is our misfortune here in Brettinoro——"

"To be cursed with sinners" broke in Carlo Faldora. "But will Lippo, and that fellow who owes your *scarpellino* thanks, attend the Casa chapel, do you think? Spare us the sermon, Father, and come to the point."

"With your courteous leave, my son," said the priest, and at the rebuke in the tone old Faldora, leaning aslant, laid a hand on his nephew's thrust-out shoulder, pressing him uncermoniously backward. "Briefly, Ser Marco, our people are cloddish."

"Peasants, just peasants, mere Giros and Marcos," said Carlo. He had drunk more of the produce of Giro's vineyard than was quite wise. This time Count Ascanio spoke and spoke sternly, roughly even. Father Bernardo was not alone God's priest but Faldora's friend, nor was it easy to say which reckoned for most with Ascanio Faldora.

"Be silent, nephew. You forget you are as yet neither Faldora of Pesaro nor master in this house. Let Father Bernardo finish in peace."

"Cloddish," went on the priest as if there had been no interruption. But now Fieravanti spoke.

"I understand. But in every clod there is a seed of growth, the germ of a life to be."

"A life to be!" Father Bernardo caught at the words eagerly. In a single phrase Marco Fieravanti had bettered the argument he hoped to urge. "But being hid in stiff clay the germ is slow to stir. Ser Marco, help us. Tangle their dull imaginations in the mesh of a saint's beauty and through the eyes stir the spirit to thought upwards. Sermons? As Signor Carlo has so delicately hinted, sermons are a weariness, and if a weariness to so fine a nature how much more to these dull souls after six days of dawn-to-dark labour in the fields? They are like little children, my poor clods, and as children learn by the eye, and through the eye awaken to thought, so will they. Help us, Ser Marco, help us. They may not understand all your marble teaches but, praise God, understanding is not necessary to faith; so, I say again, help us."

There was a silence. Below the salt the low murmur of talk had entirely ceased and all faces were turned to the

maker of saints who alone seemed unconscious of the eager interest stirred by the priest's appeal. Leaning across the arm resting on the table he met Father Bernardo's part passionate, part anxious gaze with eyes too gravely full of abstracted thought for sight. Only Carlo Faldora moved. Stretching a hand behind his cousin he beckoned to old Giuseppe to fill his glass, emptied it with ostentatious carelessness and replaced it noisily on the table. If Father Bernardo spoke from his heart with such eloquence as he possessed so also did Carlo Faldora. It was the sculptor who, turning to his host, broke the silence.

"You wish a statue for the chapel?"

"It is Father Bernardo's thought. For me, I think the less these clods of peasants understand the better. For, look you, Ser Marco, so long as they are ignorant they are God's sheep, to be herded as He wills, or, it may be, as I direct. But once let them understand they have a soul of their own and——" He broke off with a little fluttering gesture of the hand, which, in its way, was as eloquent as Carlo's draught of wine. "Bernardo thinks differently. Of course, you will name your accustomed fee," and Fieravanti nodded gravely. It gave him no shame that he should be paid for his labour.

"There is much to be considered——"

"Considered!" interrupted Carlo. "You are hard to please! Not every day such as you serves Faldora of Pesaro."

"I serve God, not Faldora of Pesaro," answered Fieravanti. "Illustrissimo, are there lodgings to be found in the village?"

"We have room here and to spare," replied Faldora. "Ten years hence, when the children have come—But even then there would be room and to spare."

Again Fieravanti nodded. He remembered Tribalda's

boast on the night of their first arrival—it would be convenient if there were fifty claimants for the custom of the Custom instead of two. But he also remembered the sundial and, half unconsciously, glancing at the girl read the vexed distaste he once before had caught. If there were loves and loves in the world it was more clear than ever that Carlo Faldora did not count as one of them, much less as the sweetest and dearest of them all.

"You would have us here in the Casa? My thanks, Illustrissimo. But there would be two of us," and Fieravanti laid a hand on his *scarpellino's* arm. "Madonna, would that be convenient—one or both of us for weeks?"

"Lucia is not the wife of Faldora of Pesaro yet, nor am I underground," said her grandfather sharply. "These will come in their time, but until then——!!"

There was again much eloquence in Faldora's fluttered hand. Now it put the girl aside as a cipher of no consequence, just as before it had hinted that the end of the world might come once the clods of Brettinoro knew their souls were their own, which, in his view, they certainly were not: they belonged to the Church just as absolutely as their bodies in muscle and limb were his possession. As to Lucia Faldora, Fieravanti, whose trade made him a reader of faces, guessed that had she spoken her thought she would have said, May both these yets be far from me! As it was, she being a Faldora in blood as well as name, the gesture did not silence her utterly.

"My grandfather has answered for me. There is so much room to spare that you need never be reminded why you are in Brettinoro at all!"

"Eh?" Carlo pushed hastily forward. "And why is he in Brettinoro at all?"

"Let us finish our business," said his uncle with the same show of vexed temper as when he had intervened on

Father Bernardo's behalf. "Is all arranged? You agree?"

"Your pardon, Illustrissimo, but there is one thing more —perhaps a second. Your subject?"

"Oh, that? That I leave to Father Bernardo."

"I thought of Our Lady" said the priest hesitatingly. "There at Castel-Cavo——"

"Yes, but Our Lady is not just one! Or if one, then with many attributes. Which is in your mind? There is Our Lady of Succour, Our Lady of Pity, Our Lady of Sorrows, Our Lady the Great Mother——"

Faldora brought his open hand down on the table with a force that set the glasses ringing. "Good—good! You've said it, Ser Marco, you've said it! Our Lady the Great Mother! Now I heartily agree. Now I begin to see some sound sense in it all, eh, Lucia, eh?"

Again there was silence: not a soul at the table but understood and applied the inference. The double line of expectant faces, expectant of they knew not what but conscious that there was unrest in the air, which had been turned towards the maker of saints now shifted gaze to Lucia Faldora and the man at her side. They made a strong contrast, these two. The girl, less lovely than Fieravanti had ever seen her, sat very upright with nothing of the saint about her compressed lips, and still less, if that were possible, in the defiant resentment which looked so angrily out of her hard eyes, while Carlo Faldora, sunk lolling back in his seat, smiled a broadening satisfied smile into nothingness on the flat of the table. Fieravanti, following the gaze of all, found his unsolved problem grow acute. But suddenly Count Ascanio stretched back his silver cup to be filled by Giuseppe, in wait behind him, and for the moment the gurgle of wine was the only sound. Then, with the cup filled, he pushed himself to his feet and expectancy grew yet more expectant. Here

was something beyond the customary ritual of the supper-table.

"Signors all, with your permission I shall give you a health! It is the wisdom of life to look forward, not back. Not always will Faldora of Pesaro be a barren stock, stripped almost to its roots. By the grace of God and Our Lady the Great Mother the sap will yet flow as of old, new buds will push out into leafage and through their growth the ancient strength be renewed: there will be young voices in the old halls, young feet on the empty stairs, young life where——" the strong voice shook an instant, shook almost to breaking, but only for an instant—"young life where death has sat housed these sorrowful years. Signors all—Lucia, you keep your place—I give you the Faldoras who yet shall be, Faldoras in name and in blood, Faldoras to carry on the old line through many generations in the old, unstained tradition—never yet broken—clean honour, simple faith, self-reverence and the courage which is unafraid to look God or man in the face."

He raised the cup and at the motion all stood from end to end of the long table, save only Madonna Lucia. That her colour had risen to the very crowning of her hair was no wonder considering the nature of the ceremony and with so many eyes turned curiously upon her. If she had been straightly upright before she was now rigid, stiffened to the very lips, her breath coming in a rapid and tumultuous heaving of the bosom.

Strange how a few words can bring revelation—not Faldora's words, they were not altogether new, but those spoken by the sundial: Love comes first! To the love-free woman, who had given no great thought to love, that had never seemed the truth which was now clear to the woman who realised that one day she might love with a love which made little of all save love, a love which came first to

sense as well as to spirit, a love which would say, Wifehood without love is little better than—what? There was once a woman who loved much and therefore much was forgiven her. Better the great forgiveness because of the great love than small need for pardon because of no love at all!

Not that love was born, or even stirred before its birth. No! But the woman in the loveless flesh realised the claims of her womanhood as never before and so sat rigid, while within touch of her hand stood the man whom she was certain she did not love, nor ever would or could. So realising she asked herself would there not be as great need for much to be forgiven, and less claim for the "Go in peace?" Love comes first.

And he? The broad smile had broadened, the satisfaction deepened. Love? No, again! Lucia Faldora was not one to stir his senses. If he could have laid his grip on the remnants of the ancient Faldora possessions, still large though cramped in power, without the encumbrance she represented he would greatly have desired the freedom, the licence. But since that was impossible here was a hastening of the desired end, and, remembering Forli, he knew there was urgent need the end should come by way of the altar lest it come by way of an open and shut door. After the altar? Faldora was Faldora and might rage, letting loose a bitter tongue, but with time small voices would plead a way to a grudged excusal—no! not excusal: Ascanio Faldora would never excuse the sin against the honour of Faldora, but toleration would come and Ascanio Faldora was old! His *Nunc dimittis* could not be very long postponed. Small wonder, then, that Carlo smiled as he listened, swaying a little on his feet.

"A health!" repeated Count Ascanio, the cup raised above his head. "The Faldoras who shall be!"

With the rest Fieravanti had, naturally, risen; but

though he held his glass poised he did not drink. His look was that of a man perplexed. Then, with a little nod of the head the uncertainty passed and his face lightened as much as to say, Now I comprehend! Setting the wine to his lips he sipped courteously.

"To the children of Signor Carlo! But why should Madonna Lucia not have joined in the health?"

At that all turned again to the statuary, and as the satisfied smile faded from Carlo Faldora's wine-flushed face the girl said, "Grazie, signor," with a deliberate distinctness which must have provoked an outburst had not Father Bernardo intervened with great haste. Here was failure threatening his beloved scheme just when success seemed assured.

"Our Lady the Great Mother be it! Nothing could be better—nothing! But did you say there was still a something more to be thought of?"

"A model," said Fieravanti curtly as, some whispering but most in silence, all reseated themselves. "Where in Brettinoro——"

"Oh, that is simple." Lucia's two words, so spoken, had bitterly angered Carlo Faldora; now he thought he saw his way safely to strike back. "Our Lady the Great Mother! What better than the signorina? In every way it would be admirable—the Great Mother! You take my meaning, uncle?"

"Um? Lucia a model?" Affronted pride was still hot in old Faldora's eyes, as he sat considering. "No! it would be unseemly, it would—And yet, why not? Now I think again there is certainly a fitness since she is most concerned. Looks? Not yet a mother? That's nothing! With a child in her arms every true woman looks a mother: the looks will grow with the making. What do you say, my girl?"

"Surely that is for Messer Fieravanti to decide?" she

answered tranquilly and Carlo Faldora's malice fell flat. Yet he essayed one more stroke.

"Perhaps that too has to be considered—considered was the word, was it not?"

For a moment the sculptor made no reply as, with the passionless appraisement of the artist, he searched the girl's face. Father Bernardo had been right, unless the subject fired his imagination he would have none of it. Then Lucia Faldora raised her eyes to his, held them a moment and looked aside. Motherhood? No, he read nothing of holy motherhood or its hunger, but, all unconsciously, there was an appeal in the look. For what? Nothing definite, but of all in Casa Faldora he alone understood. At that the old problem of the Castello in Forli wakened. If he were to speak effectually he must speak opportunely; here was a door to opportunity.

"Certainly it must be considered," he answered slowly. "If the Madonna will be so gracious? But I warn her that she will find it tedious——"

"Surely not with Praxiteles!" said Carlo Faldora, and at his elbow the priest drew a deep breath of relief. Doubt had passed and heart's desire about to come to Casa Faldora. Please God, the germs of life would yet stir in Brettinoro's stiff clay.

CHAPTER XII

THE CHILDREN WITH THE MOTHER

Of the next few days little need be said. In them Fieravanti made his peace with Count Ascanio by way of the fortifications of Arzano, winning an intimacy which was frank and strong with admiration upon both sides. Not the intimacy of friendship between equals, be it understood; no, Faldora was always Faldora, but to the guest of the Casa Ascanio Faldora was the courteous host who discovers in a guest unsuspected qualities which compel esteem; while behind the proud and bitter heart which Luca Melone had warned him of Fieravanti found that greatness of spirit which had won His Grandeur's praise. Here certainly was the very perfect gentleman and Grand Seigneur whose type must always be the saving salt of a nation.

Through these days, too, such early arrangements as were possible were made for the hewing out of the marble. A room on the level of the chapel was chosen as a workshop, a room lit poorly enough, because of the narrowness of the unglazed window set in the yard-thick wall, but whose light varied little between dawn and dark. As to the marble itself, an ox-cart would fetch the block of Carrara from Forli and after a necessary visit to the city the sculptor would return for the fulfilment of the commission. With Father Bernardo there were many conferences as to pose and position, but all ended in Fieravanti being left entire freedom to carry out his own conceptions as he pleased. Of the girl he saw little and of Carlo Faldora

less: except upon occasions of formal necessity she rarely appeared; he, it was understood, was occupied abroad with Giro who, through these days, was seen no more at the Casa.

"In fifteen days expect me," said Fieravanti, as, with 'Tonio already in the saddle, he made ready to mount. "Illustrissimo and Signorina, for all your courtesy our grateful thanks. Father, the idea grows! If the hand does not fail the head I think you will be content. To lighten the block 'Tonio here, and his fellow *scarpellino,* will hew it into rough shape before it leaves Forli. Count Ascanio, you are sure it can be hoisted to the workroom?"

"Yes, thank God! there are still some men left to Faldora!"

"For Romagna's sake would there were more Faldoras and more men to do their bidding. Madonna, if I hold to my present conception we shall need a child—but not at the first, that can wait. Captain Tribalda, our horses, like ourselves, have cause to praise the Custom of Brettinoro! Again our thanks to all!"

Swinging into the saddle as lightly as ever soldier set foot in stirrup he turned his horse, cap in hand, and rode bareheaded until a curve hid the gateway, Hawk following. Of three watchers each made his characteristic comment.

"A chiseller! God in Heaven! What are men coming to that he should waste himself on such stuff! But that's his peasant blood."

"He rides well," said Tribalda "and with a light hand on the bridle."

"God of Heaven?" repeated the priest, "Yes! It's my belief He sent him to Brettinoro."

As to the girl, who, this being now no chance guest of the Custom, had also come to speed him on his way, she was silent. But though silent her thoughts were many,

as is the way with women; conflicting, too, as is sometimes their way—that he was no more than a chiseller was a pity, but was it good that he had ever come to Faldora? good for Brettinoro because of its cloddishness, yes; but he had vexed her peace and at the last her dominant thought was resentment. With peasants and their like love might come first but—here she glanced at her grandfather's eagle face, half contemptuous and sternly set in the clear, strong light—but not at Faldora, no, certainly not at Faldora.

With fresh horses under them, and a down-hill journey from Castel-Cavo on the morrow, they rode briskly, their thoughts in the future as the thoughts of virile men mostly are—the new statue to be hewn for the Casa chapel, the smiths work for the frame within the clay, the block to be chosen, the pose the Master had in his conception, the length of time before they would be free; needs must that their stay run into weeks, poor 'Sandro would be lonely in Forli.

"Bring him with us, Master," urged 'Tonio. "As the old Count said, there's room to spare; what's a mouth there more or less, and we shall be the quicker away."

"Lest Giro of the cropped finger break your head?"

'Tonio patted his cudgel, now full in view since there was no need for a cloak in the May warmth. "There would be two words to that, signor! A fig for Giro and his dogs! though I'm free to admit that they are as vicious as they are ugly. No, but that 'clear the road, cattle' stuck in my throat. Englishmen have long memories."

"Then I had better leave you at Forli and take 'Sandro with me instead."

"No, master, no; for the love of all Our Ladies put together, not that! Bring 'Sandro too; as I said, we shall be the quicker away."

"I see no harm in that: they will be glad to be rid of

us and I want to perfect—no, that is not possible, but I must finish the Magdalene."

"Then you have found out what it was His Grandeur missed?"

"No!" Fieravanti shook his head. "That is still to come."

"It will never come," said 'Tonio stoutly, "Never, and for the good reason that nothing is missing."

But the Master shook his head again. He had faith in Luca Melone's shrewd clearness of vision, or, possibly, it was his keen sympathy, his warmth of heart which gave him insight? More and more Fieravanti was coming to believe that what his Magdalene lacked was of the spirit: perhaps he would yet find it in Brettinoro, but in any case His Grandeur was right when he said, Better a month's delay than a botched job. The greatest of all workers works slowly and with infinite patience, a too hot eagerness to see the end is a vice of clay. A month? Already the month, and more, had passed; but with so wise a man as Luca Melone the limit of time was no more than a figure of speech.

It was late for the midday meal when they entered the hamlet where they had dined.

"But," said 'Tonio cheerfully, "they'll warm rye porridge for us and the welcome will give it savour. And, Master, since you need a child for the Madonna's arms why not choose that solemn-eyed bambina they called—I forget her name! But you remember how the mother cuddled—God of Mercy! What has come to the poor folk!"

Breaking off, he drew rein sharply and both sat staring at the vile heap of blackened ruins lying piled where poverty had given them of its best not two months before. Ruin? Never was nor could be ruin greater, never ruin more sordid or complete. Through a tumbled mass of

fire-swept rubble charred beams, tossed every way in confusion, thrust their splintered ends nakedly to the sun. So utter was the destruction, the eye could trace no sign of door or window, while scarcely a course remained with one stone upon another to say here ran a wall.

Nor was the wreckage newborn. Rain, no passing shower but the pitiless raging of mountain storms through weeks of exposure, had washed the burnt bones clear of the smaller wastage; already, in the untiring repair of nature, through the warmth of May a faint shadow of greenery lay across the sheltered angles where the dust of the road had blown.

"The poor souls," said Hawk pityingly. "Oh, the poor souls; what loss——" then his pity checked, stiffening into passion "Lippo! Signor, signor, do you think—can it have been——" Again he checked, too choked to speak. It is not often men of his race lose grip of themselves, but when they do their abandonment is complete.

Making no reply Fieravanti looked about him. His first thought had also been of pity; but even before Hawk had cried "Lippo!" pity had slipped into fear, a horrible dread lest, innocently, but no less surely for that, they had been the cause of this irreparable disaster. From behind a bush upon the valley-ward side of the road a white face peered furtively and he beckoned.

"Here, little son! See!" and, as once before on that very road, he drew a coin from his pocket, "You'll take no hurt; come!" and fearfully, furtively like some timorous wild thing, the lad obeyed, drawn by that magnet which draws all the world. It was significant that he circled round until he had the safe vantage of the houses in his rear.

He was of Piero's age, as ragged but less pinched: the fields gave at least food for the winter. But being of the fields he was less alert, heavier witted, and suspicious of

he knew not what as is the way of the wilds. Holding the coin within the boy's reach Fieravanti waited until he drew near, then said,

"You must earn it, little son. That fire there, how came that about."

Always fearfully, furtively, the boy glanced back across his shoulder. "I—I don't know."

"Don't know? But you saw it burn?"

"Yes." Again there was the backward glance. "We saw—all of us."

"How then? Tell me."

From Fieravanti's face his eyes shifted to the coin: when he looked back terror was clear in them, "Signor, I—I—dare not."

"Dare not? Then it was no accident? Was it—Lippo?"

This time the glance was at 'Tonio, as if to ask, Is he to be trusted? Apparently what he read in the Englishman's eyes reassured him for he nodded, then instantly looked behind in a sudden shivering rush of the old terror.

"Lippo" repeated Fieravanti between shut teeth; then, more gently, "Tell us, little son. Of what are you afraid? Of Lippo? But don't you see that the wider Lippo's vengeance is known the better it will please him? There will be the greater fear lest he do the same again. What happened?"

For a moment he stood shifting from one naked foot to another, his lips working between I will and I dare not, as desire or fear swayed him; but as he glanced behind him for the third time with that terrible dread alive in his eyes, a dread more eloquent of Lippo's heavy hand than any torrent of words, the door of the hovel which stood next the blackened ruin was opened and a woman looked through. Pausing, she stood doubtful; then as she crossed the road towards them Fieravanti threw the

lad the coin with, "Here, little son. Be easy, you have done no harm." Snatching it up, he circled back to the covert of the bushes and hid, peering.

Lifting his cap, as the woman drew near, a courtesy which met with no response, the sculptor pointed to the rough heaps of fire-scathed stones and charred beams. "A sorrowful sight, mother. How came it?"

"What were you asking Marco, signor?"

"Marco, is he? Why, I am also Marco. It is a common name among us peasants. We are all, I suppose, called after the good saint."

"A peasant—you? Not one of us, signor."

"Born one, and with a warm heart for my own. Have no fear, mother. Tell me, what happened? Was it Lippo's doing?"

"Lippo's doing," she repeated. A spasm shook her, but whether fear, resentment, hate, or the terror of memory Fieravanti could not decide. She was older than the woman who had fed them, more haggard, more lined and wrinkled. After middle age has passed, and to the field worker middle age comes early, the effect of time is cumulative: though no more than a few years older than her neighbour she already was almost aged.

Having said the two words she stood silent, a doubt in her eyes. As with the boy so with her, the question crying for assurance was, Can you be trusted? and, with Lippo's record writ large behind her she was more than justified. Lippo, be it remembered, was a brute and a cruel devil: also, it seemed, he could be pitiless. Fieravanti answered the doubt in simple, direct words.

"Speak plainly and have no fear. Have you ever heard of Marco Fieravanti, a maker of saints—yes; Our Lady there in San Giovanni in Castel-Cavo: I am Marco Fieravanti. Have no fear. What happened?"

She had been standing a pace or two away, now in a stride she laid a shaking hand on his knee.

"By God and Our Lady——"

"By Christ Himself!" Bareheaded Fieravanti crossed himself. "By Christ Himself I swear that if Lippo has done hurt to these poor souls then God do the like to me and more also if I do not—But there! Let words be! Have no fear."

"Done hurt?" Gripping his knee she shook him, her dull eyes red-rimmed with passion. "I heard what you said to Marco and its true—he wants it known. For why? Terror's his friend and God He knows Lippo has that friend at least in every heart hereabouts." She paused, choked by her own vehemence, then, with a swallow in the throat, caught breath again.

"Tell it your own way," said Fieravanti. "There were five who lived there, were there not?"

Following his gesture she turned. Her hand still lay on his knee, the fingers gripping and relaxing and gripping again as if, like the boy Marco, she, too, alternated between I dare and I dare not.

"Aye, five." The bubble of her passion was pricked and she spoke heavily. "Margotti, Brigitta, Nello, Luca and little Maria—God save us! Little Maria—little Maria," she ended in a whisper. She who was childless and past childbearing loved children.

"And now?"

"Dead, signor; all dead—all dead."

"God save us!" echoed 'Tonio, but on a different note. "Dead? All dead? How—why—where——"

"Where? Here!" The clutch on Fieravanti's knee tightened like the grip of steel hooks as she nodded at the charred heaps offending the clean brightness of the day. "Why? Because Lippo said they gave warning——"

"Warning?" Fieravanti's hand closed over hers in a

grip as close as her own. "Yes? Mother, yes; gave warning to whom?"

"To two who passed——" A convulsive grip of his fingers startled her and she turned, staring. "You? Oh, my God, was it you? You ate their bread and—there! See for yourselves."

"Tell us, mother."

Never had 'Tonio heard the Master speak in just such a voice; never, for that matter, had he or any other man seen just such a look on his face. It was as the deathless anguish of the marble Laocoon stamped in flesh, but through the anguish, dominant above the torture, a cold passion broke more full of vengeance than any vow cried to heaven. Reading the look her own anger died as suddenly as it had sprung into life.

"They came after dark seven weeks ago, perhaps eight. There were a dozen of them or more, Lippo himself lead them."

"Was there a fellow there with a clout round his head?" demanded 'Tonio. "They call him Giro; the little finger of his left hand is cropped."

"Yes, signor. I saw him by—by—the firelight."

"They came after dark," said Fieravanti. "Yes; what happened?"

"Lippo sat his horse on the road, just where you are, and Giro did as he bade him. Two travellers had eaten on their way to Brettinoro—at what house? Margotti's, they were told and—" Suddenly the tears came in a flood, no quiet weeping but an open-mouthed sobbing as she faced them. "I can't go on, signor. I can't, I can't—the children, the little innocent Maria who ran in and out of my door as if it was her own! Every night I hear them. Margotti had the best of it; he died fighting, but he's there—all the same he's there."

"The children?" said Fieravanti. His ruddy face had

gone white and he was breathing hard. "What of the mother and the children?"

"There, signor," she quavered. "They shut the door on them and—and—they're there! Oh, God be good to us, God be good to us, ask me no more. It was His mercy when the roof fell in on them, but I can't sleep o' nights for thinking."

"Amen to His mercy! But as to this Lippo—May he do so to me and more also if Lippo does not pay to the full. But, mother," there were tears on his own cheeks as he spoke; as for Hawk, that demonstration which is so seldom let loose in men of his race was having free course unashamed. "But, mother, why are they there still? Surely —surely——"

"Why? Because—let them bide, said Lippo, bide as a warning. Whoso stirs them goes by the same road, and he swore his oath to it."

"But it is an offence to heaven——"

"Heaven's far off and Lippo's near," she answered. "There was once a time, yes, but that was before my day and when we were Faldora's folk"

"And now?"

"All I know is we pay taxes—for that!" she added with bitter irony as she turned and stared at the blackened stones.

"Hold my horse, mother." Dismounting, Fieravanti crossed the road and on the verge of the charnel wreck stood cap in hand as in a church, or by the edge of an open grave. Presently there was a touch on his elbow and he found Hawk at his side. The Englishman's fair skin had gone grey, all the weather-bitten health wiped from it.

"My fault," he whispered. "You bade me keep silence and—and—more than once I spoke without thought. God give me a grip of his throat, that's all I ask!"

"The fault of a greater than you," answered Fieravanti.

"No Lippo nor any such damnable work should be possible. Take comfort, 'Tonio; sooner or later that devil-brute would have heard. Besides, what is past is done with, except to point a road for the future. For that, God help us both!"

Bowing, he was silent with closed eyes; but his lips moved and who can tell but the prayer was consecration enough. Yes, and more than enough: it is our dead who consecrate God's earth, not the earth our dead: no! not even though there be a marching of the boundaries and an asperging in all the solemn glory of the Church's ceremonials. It is to be feared that Anthony Hawk, at his side, prayed with the darker side of his soul; he was very bitter of spirit, and if curses flew to their target more than Lippo would have had a swift and troubled end.

"'Sandro?" said Fieravanti when at last they returned to where the woman waited, dry-eyed now and dull of countenance with all the cloddishness of Brettinoro, "Yes, I think we shall bring 'Sandro back with us. A good lad, 'Sandro; he can use more than a chisel and hammer at times." Mounting, he filled the woman's palm with silver. "That's an earnest, mother. Take my advice, forget you ever saw us. If need be, threaten Marco with *that* across the road there if he talks," and with a last backward glance at the grim blackness of Lippo's warning they rode on.

That night they lay at Castel-Cavo, but for reasons best known to himself the maker of saints paid no visit to the shrine of Our Lady of Mercy.

CHAPTER XIII

COLD MARBLE AND WARM BLOOD

In the saddle betimes, and riding quickly, the morning was still young when the travellers reached their old lodgings of the Aquila Nera. Finding the door wide Fieravanti drew rein and, stooping forward, glanced within. Sure enough, there was the broad bulk of the little mother busied here and there, a shadow among shadows.

"Ho! There! Aquila Nera!" he called and she came to the door, blinking perhaps at the sudden brightness, perhaps at the memory of a villain goat.

"Oh, so it's you! Good-day, signors both. We have looked for you these weeks past. And did you go by the lower road?"

"Yes," answered Fieravanti shortly, "and fell among thieves. God's curse on that scoundrel, Lippo; I will be even with him one day yet."

"Even with him?" she repeated, her broad, comely face grave with thought. Had Lippo played them false after all, reaping where they had sown and yet cheating them of their dues? Bluntly she put the question. "Did he rob you then?"

"He might have, but for 'Tonio here. No! But there are five dead on the hills behind there, dead in damned cruelty, all because of a word of warning."

"So that was it?" she said, nodding slowly. "We heard of—of—the burning, but not the why. Um—dead, are they? Lippo's ill to handle except with gloves."

"Please God we'll mishandle him yet, and with naked fists."

"You, signor?" At the hard sternness, so foreign from the man, the gravity deepened in her eyes. "But you are bound for Forli, are you not?"

"To-day, yes; but before June we shall be back in Brettinoro and then—But there's no good talking of it."

There the little mother differed. "You know our wine of old, come in, signors both, and try it again."

"Not to-day. Forli's far off——"

"Far off? Forli? And it all the way downhill? It's nought of a ride, signors, nought of a ride: you'll be in Forli hours before sunset. Come in for old kindness' sake," she urged.

"Not to-day." Fieravanti was firm. Somehow it stuck in his memory that the road to Castel-Cavo had been longer in Vaga's imagination than in reality; that to Forli might well be reversed, to the profit of the Aquila Nera. "These villain goats, have they strayed since we were here two months ago?"

"The goats?" For a moment she was taken aback, then laughed cheerfully. "Twice or thrice, signor, twice or thrice: but they have their uses, these goats!" and she was still laughing when the two rode on.

But the laugh died and, one huge, half-naked arm propped against a door-post, she stood looking into vacancy with depth of thought. Which way lay wisdom—that is to say, profit? To warn Lippo that there might be a harrying of his wasp's nest, or to let the harriers go their own way in quietness? If she was any judge of a man's face the harrying would be thorough: there would be an end to Lippo. An end to Lippo? That meant an end to the wandering of goats, and less to go under the hearth-stone for little Gian.

That was bad, but there was a possible worse. Rumours of five dead had travelled down from the Brettinoro road; what if Lippo, unwarned of the threatened harrying, came

to know of her knowledge and her silence? "Mother of Mercy!" she muttered as she shivered with an intake of the breath. In that case little Gian would never handle what lay under the hearthstone. There would be an end to the Black Eagle and its brood, and the Black Eagle was no red Phœnix to rise anew out of fire!

But if she warned him and the warning saved him? Her comely face brightened at the thought, only to cloud afresh. Could it save him? Let the countryside once be roused—and yet, who was this maker of saints to rouse the countryside? Pest upon the man! Why could he not have come in and babbled over his wine? If she knew anything of a man and a woman she could have had his plans out of him as clean as an empty pocket and he never know it! Then she could have judged whether to warn or not warn Lippo was best; now——

Yes, what now? Lippo was—oh, a pest upon Lippo too! Lippo went too far. Five dead, and all for loss of a purse which might or might not have been full: certainly Lippo went too far. In the end she decided to wait for the return from Forli. She might pick his brains then and it would be time enough: wasps' nests, such nests as Lippos build, cannot be harried with bare fists, not by men of sense, and she did not judge this maker of saints to be a fool. Preparation meant waste of time in Brettinoro and Lippo could be warned. Placidly and well content she went back to her cooking-pot.

If Fieravanti had received many greetings as he rode out in the early March morning there were yet more to welcome his return when he passed the gates with the sun still high. That these were chiefly from humble folk did not lessen their sweetness, increased it, rather, and rightly. He who can touch the heart of the poor and hold their love is the true king of men, let who may wear the crown. And this love the maker of saints held so securely

that a crusade cried against Lippo would have met with an instant response but for Ordelaffi's guards. Not for his own life's sake would Girolamo Ordelaffi dare permit the people to arm at their pleasure, whether against Lippo or any other, lest, having sensed their power, they turn these arms against himself.

But many heads were bared, and here and there not a little clamouring arose, as the sculptor, 'Tonio following, passed along the narrow, crowded streets to his workshop in the Via dell' Agnello where they found 'Sandro, all unconscious of their coming, disconsolately polishing the lions for the San Agostino pulpit. The roughing-out had been done in a week, and to keep his heart comforted he had finished the job after his own fashion: at the worst it would be but the spoiling of so much marble—God, He knows, a small price to pay for ease of spirit through two weary months. But, let it be said, there was no such spoiling. To this day 'Sandro's lions, couched but with heads erect, look down the dim nave of the ancient church with their own dumb message of courage, strength and alert guardianship for whoso has the wit to understand.

How 'Sandro met the Master and the Master him may be left to the imagination. 'Tonio standing by, sneered in secret at his fellow *scarpellino* as a slobbering fool because he kissed the Master's hand with more fervour than he would have kissed Pope Clement's, and all the while envied him because he could so let his heart out of his breast to speak for itself: then, vexedly, told himself it was natural that the Master should love a man of his own race best, till Fieravanti, reading the signs with shrewd eyes, took him by the arm and of the two made three.

"He will never tell you, so I must. But for him there might be no Marco Fieravanti alive to-day. Up there in the hills he risked his life for mine," whereat 'Sandro, instead of giving thanks, looked as if, in his opinion, the

risking should have been the giving outright. In his jealous love he would have been more grateful to 'Tonio dead than, at the moment, he was to 'Tonio living.

It was then that the Agostino lions came in for the praise due to their maker, and with 'Tonio joining in wholeheartedly all three were good friends as of old: 'Sandro's skill as a workman waked no jealousy in Anthony Hawk.

Because of his many welcomes Fieravanti's return to Forli could not be hid. Naturally, having his spies in every street, Girolamo Ordelaffi at the Castello was one of the first to hear the news, with the consequence that before noon of the next day Amata Capponi's litter was set down before the workshop in the Street of the little Lamb.

This time there was no such exuberance as had welcomed Luca Melone. But if Forli was not roaring itself hoarse, neither did it rip up the cobbles it would have flung at a bishop who had earned its full-blooded hate. There was reason in the restraint. The Church did not strike back as Girolamo Ordelaffi would have struck, so the crowd —in Forli one has but to hold up a wet finger to see how the wind blows to draw a crowd—stood lowering in sullen silence, or at most cursed under its breath the woman for whose pleasuring it was ground to the dust with taxes.

The Church? To Forli the arm of flesh with a rope in one mailed fist and a pike in the other counted for more than all the Church's anathemas. So it lowered and glowered but discreetly left the cobbles where the pavior's hammer had driven them, and Amata Capponi, gayer than any parrot in the red silken gown which she knew became so well her dark beauty, looked back the glowering insolently from under her black brows. Well she knew the wild beast which lurks hidden in every mob was flexing its claws in itching secret and, being a woman of courage, abated her insolence not one fraction of a jot for the knowledge.

Nor, being naturally wanton as well as no coward, did it content her to look her insolence. No, she must needs flaunt it, leaning on Ordelaffi's page, who had walked by her litter's side from the Castello, in such a way that the loose-cut robe slipped its sleeves to the shoulder, leaving the rounded, shapely arms bare for all to see. Why not? June was hot in the narrow streets and the flaming red which set off her colouring made the warm air no cooler: a wonderful robe it was, loose-sleeved but fitting close to the bust she knew to be so admirably moulded, and yet so thin in texture that the silk was so like a second skin as hardly to be decent. Again, why not? Was she not going to cajole Marco Fieravanti? Fieravanti, who took women as God made them and shaped saints from his imagination of what they were? Surely the less the imagination and the more the reality the truer the marble would be, to the woman if not to the saint? So argued Amata Capponi, who had not forgotten her two-months'-old rebuff on the night of the dice-cogging.

By the time she was clear of the litter 'Sandro had opened the door. It was just as well it was not 'Tonio who gave the service: of the two *scarpellini* the Italian was the more supple minded. Anthony Hawk might have answered her insolence—for she was still insolent—according to its quality; 'Sandro was more politic!

"Your Master, is he within? Yes? Then lead the way —In his workshop is he? So much the better. It is there I wished to find him."

And there, presently, they found him much as His Grandeur had two months before, pressing the lever which sent the Magdalene circling on her turntable. But not as the Church had entered in the person of Luca Melone entered Amata Capponi. Brushing 'Sandro aside with her accustomed arrogant impatience she swept past him like the tempest-driven flame she looked.

"Ser Marco, Ser Marco, where have you hidden yourself these two months? Is this the famous Magdalene? Phit! she's stone cold! Where's her hint of dalliance? Where's her enticement? Where's her allure? By the other Mary! I see none! The Magdalene? Why, she's an ice-block and no true woman, much less that other! I thought you knew us better? To win men, my friend, one must warm their blood."

"To win them for hell; yes, perhaps, though of that I know nothing," answered Fieravanti, easing the pressure upon the lever as he spoke.

"No?"

The curt word was an insolence. From the marble she turned and looked him up and down as once before in the Castello. Her verdict then had been that he was the handsomest man in the thronged room with its dazzled confusion from a hundred lamps; seen now, in the warm, clear daylight, she found no reason to change her opinion. Curiosity had partly drawn her to his workshop, partly idleness, partly the desire for some new sensation: now, looking him up and down as he faced her in his grey linen gaberdine, idle curiosity hardened into a definite purpose. If Girolamo were jealous let him be jealous; always she had her way with Girolamo, why not now?

"And yet, by your looks you should have good blood to warm. Ser Marco, I bring you a commission——"

"Signora, my hands are full. Already I have promised——"

"Then unpromise! A promise? Phit! Promises only hold good until something better comes our way. And I bring you! Saints? Leave making saints for once and give the world—a Venus!" She laughed consciously as she half checked herself at the last words, the sweeping gesture of her arms, white and warm in their loose sleeves, pointing the goddess. Nor did Fieravanti fence.

"Signora, you are too tall. By convention in our Italy Venus is small-limbed."

"Convention?" she scoffed. "What have I to do with convention? Too tall? No, so much the better if one is a goddess every inch. Shall I make a Venus fit for Olympus, Ser Marco?"

Again there came the gesture as she smiled into his eyes, her own lit with broadening triumph. Amata Capponi had no intention of failing in the allure she missed from the Magdalene.

"But, signora," answered Fieravanti, smiling back, "how can I be here and in Faldora at the one time?"

"Faldora?" she stiffened in displeasure at the hinted difficulty. Hitherto, since grown a woman, to say I will had been reason sufficient and an end to difficulties. "What have I to do with Faldora?"

"Nothing: but I have promised Count Ascanio a Madonna for the Faldora chapel."

"Then unpromise—unpromise," she retorted. "I am sick to death of your cold saints."

"Signora, to my sorrow"—which was more politic and courteous than true—"my word is passed. Already the marble is being made ready for transmission——"

"The marble, yes! But before the marble comes the clay. If you must hold to your word—though I see no need—here's a model for your clay—here!" For the third time she stretched her arms in that enticement, that dalliance, which in her eyes the Magdalene lacked. True, the attitude was hardly that of a Madonna; but as she had said, What had she to do with convention! Besides, she and the Madonna, were they not both alike women?

"Impossible, Signora. Already the model is chosen——"

"Who?" Black browed in very truth she almost spat the word at him.

"The Signorina Faldora."

"Faldora?" Intent on her own purpose it was only now that a chord of memory stirred at the repetition of the name. "Faldora! Oh yes!" and she laughed. "Sister, no doubt, to that——" But even in her vexed passion she remembered Ordelaffi's strict orders and looked back towards the door. But they were alone, 'Sandro had discreetly shut himself without. "That false dicer? A sweet Madonna, by my word, a very sweet Madonna. No doubt they made a pair!"

"No sister: a far-off cousin, nothing more." Unconsciously Fieravanti spoke curtly, anger sharpening his voice for the first time, so that for a moment she stood silent, then again broke into a laugh. Now, the Amata Capponis of this world do not always laugh pleasantly.

"No sister: a far-off cousin!" she mocked. "And that does not please you! But nothing more! Nothing more as yet? Oh, I have it; your country wench is to marry this cogger of dice, and that does not please you either? Is she more fit to be a saint of your making?"

"She is, I think, fit to be Our Lady the Great Mother."

"The mother to the children of a cogger of dice! Ser Marco, I challenge you. Side by side, which would you choose, her or me? Your country wench of a Faldora or Amata Capponi?"

With something more than challenge she met and held his eyes. Girolamo Ordelaffi was no green boy to be swept from his feet by the first pretty face that smiled upon him, and from more lips than Ordelaffi's she knew that in Forli her warm beauty had no rival. Therefore there was an arrogant assumption, an audacious assurance of triumph in the challenge, an insolence, a contemptuous scorn of this unknown Faldora with whom, for her own set purpose, she deigned to compare herself.

CHAPTER XIV

A CHOICE OF MODELS

VERY gravely, like a man who, seriously asked a doubtful question, seriously desires to answer it, the maker of saints accepted the challenge. And the forced comparison bore unexpected fruit. For the first time the man in him, not the maker of saints but the man of warm blood Amata Capponi had called him, took a man's thought of the woman who was Lucia Faldora; thought not of Luca Melone's possible saint in the making, thought not of the Madonna who was the Great Mother, but simple thought of the woman who was as God and her own thoughts made her. And since it is inevitable that for such a purpose the mind seizes upon one clear-cut picture which is the essential self to be mirrored in the thought, Fieravanti recalled a garden chequered with light and shade, an open stretch of smooth grass and an ancient sundial by which stood a woman in cool lawn, her hand on his arm, a frank appeal in her eyes as she confessed her pride had wronged him. That, surely, was Lucia Faldora, the woman.

Comparison? There was none: contrast, yes, but no comparison. As well say, compare the lily of the Annunciation with a flaunting poppy; or snow, new fallen, with a flaming fire which smokes as it flames. Not that Lucia Faldora was cold as snow. No; there was latent fire; more than once he had felt the heat which, by a paradox, is found in the very heart of the snowdrift. Courageous, clear-sighted, generous to self-sacrifice, pure as snow yet

warm at the heart; truly that was a woman worthy to be Our Lady the Great Mother. Could any man desire more for the blessing of life? Yes—Love? Perhaps his grave eyes softened at the flashed thought for, misreading the sign, Amata Capponi cried out in her exultation:

"I knew it! Oh, we shall be circumspect, we two: no Eve to a man's Adam, no Venus, lest Ordelaffi grow ill-tempered, but a goddess none the less. You choose me, my Marco, you choose me!"

"For a Venus, signora, yes; or a Phryne, a Thaïs. For any of these, yes, without a doubt; but for the Mother of God—No!"

Fieravanti, feeling strongly, spoke more strongly, more decisively than he knew. Almost there was at the last an antagonism, a censure, and again she stiffened in vexed offence.

"No? Who your Thaïs or your Phryne may be I do not know, but what I want I shall have. Motherhood? Is it that you doubt? Oh, though I am no milk-maid like your Faldora I'll show you I can play the part. Call Luigi."

And Fieravanti, not knowing who Luigi might be but thinking it easier to comply with her order than combat her vexed spleen, did as she bade him. It was the page who answered.

"Bring me some ragged brat of the streets," she commanded. "The raggeder the better. Say it is I, Amata Capponi, who have need for her for five minutes. Wait, Ser Marco, wait" she went on as Luigi disappeared, wondering what new freak was on foot; Amata Capponi had little in common with rags that went hungry in the streets. "You know little of women if you think we cannot look a meek and whited tenderness when there is a gain to be won; but, by Holy Paul! as Girolamo says, it must be worth the winning."

"And, signora, is this worth while?"

"Yes, since it pleases me. Do you not know that there is nothing so good in life as the whim of the moment? This Faldora girl, describe her. Is she like that far-off cousin we know of?"

"No, thank God!"

"Yet he was pretty enough to look at—What, Luigi? Is there no brat in sight? Then go hunt one! Hasten, lest you taste the whip on your shoulders—not for the first time."

"Children in plenty, Illustrissima, but——" The lad hesitated a moment betwixt memories of the whip she threatened and a fear of future realities. But an impish yet very human desire to strike back decided him. "They said that by God's grace they would keep their children from the devil."

At that the termagant in her woke. "By Holy Paul, they'll smart for that! The devil, do they say? I'll prove it true—I'll so stir the fires——"

"Signora," Fieravanti's voice overbore her passion, so authoritative was it. "Would you stir the fires to scorch yourself and all for a boy-fool's malice? Let him taste the whip, and soundly; it's his deserts. Give me three minutes and I shall fetch a child." Nor did he wait for a reply, but thrusting before him the page, now on the edge of weeping for all his dignity of thirteen years, left her alone.

Within his set limits of time he was back, a child in his arms, a solemn, wide-eyed girl of three and not the raggedest out of ragged Forli: poor to privation, but with a mother's careful love writ large upon her poverty in darns and patches.

Already Amata Capponi's mood had changed. The violence of her passion was spent, leaving her flushed of face and sullen. Girolamo would do much for her, but certainly he would not set Forli ablaze upon her account. Vexed, she had caught the lever and was shifting the statue

back and forth with short, impatient jerks, her eyes bent on the upturned face of the marble. Hearing Fieravanti's footfall she looked up.

"Call that thing a woman!" she said spitefully. "It's what I said at first—cold stone and no more. That is the worst of marble, there's never blood in the veins. Give me canvas and warm flesh! Is that the brat? Here! Give her to me. The Great Mother, did you say? Now, Ser Marco, judge—judge."

Taking the child roughly, for, though passion had spent its violence there was still the will to hurt what lay nearest, she caught her to her breast with awkward, unaccustomed arms from which the loose sleeves had slipped aside and faced him, arrogant in the knowledge of her beauty. But, first to her surprise and chagrin, then to her vexed anger, she read distaste, disapproval, displeasure even. Hastily she mended her hand, easing the child more naturally and wrapping her shapely arms in the concealing sleeves.

"My faith! I forgot! It is the mother in me you want, not the woman."

Yet, being who and what she was she could not keep the woman out of her eyes, but sought to conquer him by the allure which hitherto had never failed. In her absorption she forgot the child, gripping it so tightly that, patient as the children of the poor must needs be, the pinched face puckered into soundless tears. Whereat Fieravanti shook his head.

"Signora, had I a mirror you would see for yourself and understand."

"A mirror?" she cried, all flame on the moment. "God's name! have you not eyes in your head—no, not to look with but for me to see! There! take your brat! a stone to hack a stone from a stone!" she gibed as Fieravanti

clasped the child she almost flung into his arms, "like from like; that's all you are fit for, you and your cold saints. So you choose the dicer's wench, do you? Be sure I'll not forget."

"Signora," began Fieravanti as she swung towards the door on her heel; but she halted to snarl back at him,

"Illustrissima to you and your peasant kind, always Illustrissima: remember that, my Praxiteles of the mud." With that she went.

Soothing the child Fieravanti followed, but not at once. It was wiser to give the litter time to leave the Via dell' Agnello lest she should break out on him afresh, and the folk be less lamblike than was good for their comfort: nor did the small hand go empty when the mother dried the last tears from the pale cheeks.

Returning, Fieravanti stood long by his handiwork, turning the lever idly but with no thought for what was still lacking from the pure, cold face. Another face was clear-cut before him, a face no less pure and scarcely less cold. Was he wise to return to Faldora at all? He, one of the peasant kind, no Praxiteles but a simple maker of saints. Of the mud? The phrase was the venom of a vexed woman's spleen, but would Ascanio Faldora not agree? Therefore, was he wise to return?

Why not? Because love had meshed him? He knew that now, taught by Amata Capponi's forced contrast and her sneering will to smirch. And when a man of his years, no half-formed passionate boy to dream himself heart-deep in love one day and waken out of it the next, but a man grown to a man's full height and depth—His thought stumbled, losing stride. Height and depth of passion? Yes! No stone, but a man as nerved with the fires of passion as ever any son of Adam, a man who these years had looked woman's beauty in the face, aye, and their

allure, their enticement, their more than hinted dalliance, without a heart's throb until, now, unsought, against all hope, all reason—

With a despairing lift of the hands he turned away. Such a man had better go no more to Faldora, the sacrifice was too great. Then he remembered Carlo Faldora. No, there was no help for it; return he must: nor, on second thoughts, would there be a sacrifice. Suffering there might be—must be, but that which love suffers for love's sake can never be called sacrifice; rather it is love's justification.

And Amata Capponi? In the flaming heat of their wrath some natures cry, I'll not forget! and cooling, straightway do forget; but not Amata Capponi. Forget? No! With every new day the galling to her wounded vanity rankled yet more rawly. But how to strike back? Through Ordelaffi? Ordelaffi would laugh at her, tolerantly at first, then, if she persisted, not so tolerantly and for good cause. Marco Fieravanti held the love of Forli; not even for her sake would Ordelaffi set Forli ablaze, turning that love into a new cause for hate against himself. Besides, she would have to explain, and however well she lied Ordelaffi would scent the truth and laugh yet louder at the thought of Amata Capponi masquerading as the Great Mother—hint Venus she would not dare.

But when, on the fourth day, Ordelaffi's spies brought word that an ox-cart had arrived from Faldora to be laden with a block of marble from the maker of saints a light broke. Carlo Faldora! Watching her opportunity she sent for Ordelaffi's secretary. Born not so far from the mud herself she knew nothing of letters, a sign-manual being the limit of her skill with a pen.

"Write this," she ordered curtly, *"Marco Fieravanti was present in the Castello the night of the dicing, see to yourself."*

"But, Illustrissima, my lord has forbidden——"

"He forbids and I bid—choose! But if you refuse, as I live I'll break you like that!" and crumpling one of his quills into flinders she flung it aside. "Now," she went on when he had written, "speak to my lord of this and he will do the breaking!"

So it came about that when, presently, the driver of the oxen returned by the Flaminian Way he had in charge not alone the block of marble, roughly shaped, in his cart, but in his pouch a letter for the young Count, which letter if he lost he might go hang himself lest worse befall.

CHAPTER XV

BIRDS OF A DARK FEATHER

SINCE Giro of the broken head and missing finger, better known as Giro of the dogs, had been too busied of late with the labour on his far-off vineyard to show himself at the Casa, that business following upon Fieravanti's supper on his return from Arzano, it was natural that Carlo Faldora should be more often abroad through the hills. It was, then, the cause of no remark when on the day following the arrival of the ox-cart from Forli he mounted and rode hillwards. Nor did any connect the fact that he rode earlier than his wont with the receiving of a letter which he had opened carelessly the night before and read with a curse. No; if any gave the letter a second thought it was that the young signor, being the signor and young, had left debts behind him in Forli: now, debts have an uncomfortable habit of following a man wherever he may go, and curses are the cheapest mode of payment yet discovered.

It was natural, too, and without any apparent connection with the letter, that Carlo Faldora should question the driver of the cart as to the coming of the man who was to chisel the rough-hewn marble into saint-like shape. True, he had rather mocked at Father Bernardo's scheme for rousing the divine spark presumed to be latent in the Brettinoro clods, but it is notorious that men at times are prone to hide their finer feelings under a cloak of indifference or worse. Possibly Carlo Faldora was one of such, and in

any case all the Casa was agog to know when this new thing would begin in their midst: there are more Areopagites in the world than are to be met with on Mars Hill.

But Faldora learned little. The Master, as they called him "down there," would follow and might arrive on the morrow—next day—any day. Whereat the sacrifice of a fresh anathema was offered up, no doubt this time on the altar of Brettinoro's cloddish needs. Next morning, as has been said, the young signor rode hillwards while the dew was yet white on the grass.

Just where and in what circumstance the threads of Carlo Faldora's life had crossed those of Lippo the Ishmaelite are not of this story. It is enough that each found a use for the other with a resulting mutual benefit in crowns and ducats. Nor is it hard to conceive the gain such a man as Lippo might derive through the good offices of a friend in the camp of his enemies, while it is even less a strain on the imagination that the cogger of dice in Forli should have no scruple in sharing gains with a cut-purse of the hills.

Besides—and this, surely, makes for righteousness—it was but a temporary alliance. Carlo Faldora had his mind clearly made up—once let his position be absolutely assured, that is to say, bluntly, once let him find himself standing in his Uncle's shoes, and there would be a swift end to Lippo: a trap would be set, and the oaks of Brettinoro would bear grim fruit as a result. Thereby three things would be achieved, First, the past wiped out; secondly, future peace assured; thirdly, his conscience cleansed from present offence. Meanwhile, conscience troubled him not at all and Lippo had his uses.

Whoso knows the hills above Brettinoro knows that they are a crumple of stony ridges and intricate ravines, these latter deep wooded, well watered, sheltered in the winter and altogther admirable for the free life of a gentleman

of the road. If danger threatened on the one side, which, so far, it never had, Rome, who was responsible for law and justice, being far off, but if it so threatened there was always a choice of leisurely ways of escape.

It was up one of these roads that Faldora drove his horse in no leisurely fashion that June morning, nor, even at this back door to Lippo's comfortable quarters, was he challenged. True, for the last mile eyes had watched him, their presence unsuspected in the thickets upon either side, but the young signor was known as a friend and in any case to challenge a single horseman was pure waste; it was simpler to let him ride on deeper into the folds of the hills and then, if extreme measures were absolutely necessary, make an end at leisure.

By a seeming paradox, but in reality most naturally, through the very earliness of his visit Faldora found the camp busily astir. With Castel-Cavo a day's journey distant upon the one side, and Arzano as far upon the other, Lippo's possible tides of fortune flowed, like other tides, twice a day—in the early morning, as travellers left the hospitable Custom of Brettinoro behind them, or upon their arrival towards sunset. For the first of these, the early morning departure, preparations were in progress with Lippo himself superintending, and into the bustle and stir rode Carlo Faldora. Not all looked up as he passed, but those who did greeted him with respect, not for his own sake, be it said, but for the name he bore.

Seeing him approach Lippo beckoned to Giro.

"Here comes our rook-pigeon. Take thou command, but wait; he may have news. Good-morning, signor," he went on, meeting Faldora, his tone a subtle blending of respect and bluff equality. "Is there a hunt a-foot?"

"You have said it," answered Faldora curtly. "Bid one of your rascals take my horse, and let that crop-fingered shadow of yours go with us while we talk."

"Shadow? My faith! but some have found Giro too solid substance to please them," and Lippo laughed.

"His head was solid enough when the Englishman rattled his cudgel on it. Less bone and more brain would have saved his skull and spared us all trouble; but we're as God made us."

Lippo grew serious. "Signor, leave gibing Giro: it maddens him, that memory."

"The madder the better: he will strike home the more surely when his chance comes."

They had entered Lippo's quarters, Giro, obeying a gesture, following. It was one of the group of wooden huts which formed the camp, nor, except for solid walls, was Carlo Faldora himself better housed at the Casa. Little by little Lippo, a luxurious dog, had gathered together furnishings which old Giuseppe might have set before a Colonna unashamed. True, the floor was of beaten earth, the walls of rough-hewn timber instead of mosaic and smooth plaster, but there were warm hangings, bright-hued rugs, a soft bed, padded chairs, and glass and silver of a quality to brighten the eyes of any house-proud woman.

Flinging his cap on the bed Faldora seated himself by a table placed in the centre of the hut, motioned hastily to Lippo to uncover—lest no leave should be asked—and turned to Giro, who, being only jackal to the wolf, stood apart with a suggestion of deference not entirely feigned.

"Since you come no longer to the Casa you do not hear the news?"

"Not all of it, signor," answered Giro cautiously.

"Then here's for you—If you would cure the memory of that broken head of yours your chance has come."

"Meaning?" It was Lippo who spoke.

"Meaning that Fieravanti and his *scarpellino* will be on the road any day now."

But Lippo shook his head. "Let him come," he said very seriously. "Though he had broken ten heads, my own among them, he is safe from me."

For a moment Faldora stared incredulously, a sudden sinking disappointment gripping his heart; then he laughed, not a loud laugh nor a long, but a laugh with a spur to murder in it.

A whole chapter might be written on the influence of men's laughter and two upon that of women. It is to be doubted if words themselves are as heartening or as deadly as laughter: it can comfort sorrow, it can rouse courage, bind up broken faith, waken manhood, shame baseness, stir to generosity, thrill with God's purest happiness, turn doubt to assurance, strangle struggling good, spur to heroism, change wholesome blood to gall, damn to despair, goad to murder, heat ten times hotter the blazing fires of hell: because of laughter men have died smiling, have turned their backs on their greater selves, have risen to the very topmost heights of earth's seventh heaven or plunged head-long, cursing, to the eternal pit: there is no limit to the power of laughter. Looking Lippo in the face Faldora laughed.

"Dio mio!" he mocked. "A maker of saints they call him—Santo Lippo of Brettinoro! Or have you turned coward by any chance?"

"Oh, you may laugh, signor, you may laugh—if you think it wise! But better ten broken heads than one stretched neck: when a man's breath is once choked out of him it has a way of staying out. If you have forgotten, I have not,—and there is at least one of your name who keeps his word—'Let Lippo beware, if he lays so much as a finger on a guest of Faldora's he'll hang, Church or no Church.' Your memory that night, signor, was not good; you forgot to tell us of Count Ascanio's oath. But

we heard, oh yes, we heard as it was meant we should, and by Saint Lippo of Brettinoro I'll heed."

"Phit!" jeered Faldora. "A dotard's frothing! Does that fright you?"

"I am free to admit that the uncle frights me more than the nephew. And now that that's settled, signor Carlo, Giro had best go about his business. This maker of saints is safe for me."

"But are you safe for him? There are more oaths in the world than those sworn over a supper-table."

"Meaning, signor?"

"That this meddling chiseller swore on Margotti's bones——"

"Oh, that? So that tale has reached you too? Let him swear! What can he do, he and his chisel. Keep thou clear of him, Giro: it's an order."

But though a nod dismissed the jackal he lingered irresolutely, then broke out,

"Signors both, if I meet that cudgeller, what then?"

"Nothing! Have patience and, faith of Lippo! I promise you he'll wish he were Margotti. Do I ever forget?"

This time Giro obeyed the unspoken order. Margotti? The children with the mother were proof Lippo did not forget. Beyond the door they heard him whistle up his dogs.

Left together Lippo, the laugh still jarring his ears, touched Faldora lightly on the arm. "What is your quarrel with this maker of saints?"

"Quarrel? I? No quarrel. What quarrel could I have?"

"Why not a dicer's. Mayhap, he refused to play with you. He's of Forli, is he not?

"A dicer's? Of Forli? What—what——" But before

the jeering, dry significance in Lippo's ironic smile Faldora's bluster trailed into silence; then passion shook him, that shrewish passion which is the refuge of the weak man, all bubble and froth. White faced, a lip uplifted, dog-like, over bared teeth, he broke into a snarl. "So that tale has reached you? It's a lie—a lie!"

"Softly, signor, softly," said Lippo tolerantly. "Lie or truth is all one to me. Suppose it a lie, there's an end of it; suppose it true what matters? Nought to me! It's just that we are two of a trade with this difference—I take toll of a stranger, you drink with a friend and then—um, what shall I say? then dice with him! Either way it fills the pockets."

"A lie," repeated Faldora, but with less force, "a lie—a lie!"

"Granted, but here's the point. Supposing this Forli chiseller whispers the lie to Count Ascanio and bids him send to Ordelaffi?"

Down came Faldora's clenched fist on the table between them. "Suppose? Suppose? He will! Yet you, who might make an end to his whispers, refuse——"

"Softly, signor, softly" repeated Lippo. "The making an end to his whispers would make an end to me. That's settled. Count Ascanio swore no dicer's oath that night at supper! And there is this—why should I rake your hot chestnuts out of a fire of your own making? Let us be men of sense, signor. Clearly, so far he has whispered nothing, and if not so far then why whisper at all? At least, why in any haste? Now comes this saint making for—how long? Weeks, if not months? Here is my advice: Hasten the marriage—we know all about it, signor—hasten it all you can. *Dio mio!* in your place I would not find it hard to be ardent myself! Then, while whistling young Cupid down the wind make your opportunity and pick your own chestnuts out of the fire. How? You

wear a sword, don't you, and what is he but a chiseller? But haste—that is the essence of it all, haste and then more haste."

His passion flat out of him as froth falls flat Faldora, a thumb-point between his nibbling teeth, sat listening in silence. That Lippo should venture to be thus familiar vexed that pride of race in him which resented encroachments from below, yet failed to keep his own feet out of the mud; but he dared not openly rebuke the presumption. Lippo would have his uses yet, and Carlo Faldora was not the man to fling away a tool because it cut his fingers.

Besides, the advice was sound. These two months he had recognised the soundness, but apart from the Church's objection to Lenten marriages this cleft stick pinched him —the very pressing on the marriage, creating a stir in Forli, might bring the Castello story to Ascanio Faldora's ears, and so he had let the days drift. Now that must end. To make haste was less dangerous than to drift. Fieravanti? There, too, Lippo was right. If, so far, he had not spoken, why should he speak at all? In a word, what would speaking profit him? That, to Carlo Faldora, was at all times the touchstone of action—what did a man gain? This maker of saints, for example? Gain? So far from gaining anything he might lose! There would be an end to this priest's folly of Father Bernardo's: Ascanio Faldora's pride would never house the man who——

There the sequence of thought snapped: it led to too unpleasant realities. If Ascanio would not house the man who laid bare the blot on his name, what toleration would he show the causer of the stain? Hastily Carlo Faldora knotted the broken thread further back—No! it would not pay Fieravanti to speak. But was it wise to trust even that far? Would the silence of—of—a Margotti not be safer? Yes; there Lippo was again right. The risk? Little risk, chisel against sword! and at the thought his

sour spleen dissolved in a laugh as he met his fellow rogue's gaze frankly.

"Be it so! Haste and a quarrel! Nor, now I think of it, need there even be a quarrel. More than one of Tribalda's men owes me a good turn and will pay it for the asking: the cudgeller I leave to Giro."

Lippo nodded as both rose. "Giro will not forget. He has his methods, has Giro." But as Faldora mounted Lippo laid a familiar hand on his knee, nor, for all his pride, was it shaken off as it would have been a week before. "Signor Carlo, after all, perhaps this Fieravanti knows nothing. If not, why burn your fingers in a fire where there are no chestnuts?"

Very thoughtfully Faldora rode homewards down the winding valley. The letter said Fieravanti had been at the Castello; it did not say Fieravanti knew. Which way lay the truth? There was clear wisdom in Lippo's last words; to sell one's self to the devil for nothing is the poorest bargain the world holds. And such a selling it might be if, holding bread and salt sacred, the Grand Seigneur in Ascanio Faldora resented the killing of a guest. What then? This for one thing—assurance was wisdom: how much or how little did this accursed Fieravanti know? But how reach assurance? Though Carlo Faldora rode slowly as he pondered his problem he had found no light by the end of his journey.

CHAPTER XVI

"THEY ARE NOT MY FOLK"

WHEN, three days later, Fieravanti and his two *scarpellini* reached the Casa they found another guest more honourable than they to fill the seat at Faldora's left hand. This was no chance comer by way of the Custom but Fausto Alidosi, Lord of Imola, who, travelling with but a small company to Rimini, had ridden by way of the mountain road rather than pass near Forli. Therein he was wise. Ordelaffi and Forli had this one bond in common—they hated Imola and the Alidosi. A dungeon in the Castello, or a yet narrower lodging, was the only hospitality Fausto Alidosi could expect at the hands of the Tyrant of Forli.

Seated next him, as they ate and drank leisurely, was the maker of saints, and talk turning on the hazards of the road Fieravanti, very briefly, told the story of Margotti's warning with its tragic sequence. And as he spoke a silence fell the length of the long table, such a silence as had fallen that night when old Faldora had hailed the coming of young feet to his empty stairs—the coming of life and the passing of life, what is there in the world that matches their gravity? Life itself? Hardly. In it there are lights to break the shadows into their due proportions, but who can tell for certain what lies beyond the opening or the closing of the door? So there was a silence, and a double line of faces converging on Marco Fieravanti as, with that unconscious art which is born of deep feeling,

he made clear even to the dullest eye that pitiful small heap of blackened stones, a charnel rubble where once love had housed and the poor of their poverty given bread to the stranger.

There is a great power in quietness. Always the divine is less in the thunder than in the still small voice. Though Fieravanti spoke bitterly he spoke slowly, dispassionately and without tricks of rhetoric, leaving the grim tragedy to compel its own effects. And they differed, these effects. Below the salt were women who went white, men who clenched teeth and fists as they listened: others, both men and women, who stared open mouthed but untouched, mere Brettinoro clods; yet others, men these, who after the first glance sat back in their settles, chin on breast, though at the last one or two took fire and leaning suddenly forward cursed softly under their breath.

From the table-end Count Ascanio's eyes, fierce with the haggard fierceness of the very old when moved by passion, never shifted from Fieravanti's face; on the flat of the table one lean hand gripped and ungripped in shifting spasms: into Lucia Faldora's eyes the tears had sprung, hung large an instant then rained softly, unheeded if not unknown as she listened; opposite, Fausto Alidosi, three years the sculptor's elder and as dark of face as Fieravanti was fair, nodded a grave head from time to time, his fingers absently playing with what lay nearest as if he said it was to be deplored that such things were, but there they were and that was an end to it. That, too, seemed Carlo Faldora's philosophy as, his shoulders shrugged, his finger-tips drumming carelessly, he sat with eyes lowered lest Count Ascanio should catch and wither the ironic smile which would not be suppressed: as for Father Bernardo, his lips moved silently in God alone knew what agony of prayer, and shame that such things should be.

"The children with the mother, the little, little children. Surely God's mercy was about them in that last awful hour, for man had none."

"Surely, surely," whispered the priest. "The little children, ah, dear God! the little children," and below the salt a woman sobbed.

"God's mercy?" Fieravanti roused himself, meeting Ascanio Faldora's stern fierceness with a look hardly less stern. "Mercy? Yes, But what of the justice He leaves to men? Illustrissimo, what of justice I ask? What of justice?"

"They are not my folk. They once were, but not now." Faldora's lips had gone dry and the words came roughly as if from his throat.

"Whose then? The Church's? Father, will the Church move a finger? No! Rome is far off! A statue for their souls' good but let their bodies burn! God's mercy, then, not the Church's! Illustrissimo," this time it was Alidosi to whom he turned, "you have power—authority—men, you could crush——"

"And fall foul of the Church in the crushing? No! Every cock to his own dunghill, Messer Fieravanti."

"Then it is indeed a dunghill!"

"Now you are not courteous. But how should such as you understand? Let us be frank. It is true I have power—authority—men, but why waste these and them?"

"Waste?" There was no shift to courtesy in Fieravanti's voice, only the same indignant scorn and challenge of contempt. "To do justice is waste!"

"I said you could not understand. It is waste to throw away a greater for a lesser. These peasants must shift for themselves. Men? Soldiers? See, I shall be frank. The first duty of authority is to protect itself lest it cease to be authority. Soldiers are more necessary to power

than peasants. God, He knows, the one is harder to find than the other, these times. You find it so, Captain Tribalda?"

But Fieravanti refused to be set aside. His oath sworn by the roadside drove him. Knowing his own impotence and goaded by his extremity he allowed no time for Tribalda to reply but appealed to Carlo Faldora. "Signor, here is a deed to stir a man's soul and put his past under his feet. Will you not raise——"

"As my uncle says, they are not our folk."

"Oh!" At the reply Lucia drew in her breath like one who takes a hurt, then cried in a half sob, "Would God I were a man! Oh, would God I were a man!"

"Would God you were!" retorted her grandfather. "But being only a woman it would be better if you held your tongue—though that is not always the woman's part!"

"Not our own folk," repeated young Faldora. "And if not ours, still less Count Fausto's." Then, for the life of him, he could not refrain from a gibe. "You are a maker of saints, Ser Marco, but you will hardly make such saints of Count Fausto's men that they will risk life for a handful of clods. Make saints? Faith of Faldora, here's a way out of it! Make a saint of Lippo, Ser Marco, make a saint of Lippo."

"No saint, but as God lives I'll yet make a spirit of Lippo, or he of me."

"How? With a chisel-edge?"

"Be silent!" thundered Faldora, suddenly loosing the passion he had so hardly held. Vexed in soul at himself for his refusal he was not sorry to find a vent for his rage. "Such devil's work as this is no jest for any man, least of all for you, a Faldora. There are times, nephew, when I half doubt the blood. If they are not our folk they once were and it is no fault of theirs they are not Faldora's to this day."

"Illustrissimo!" With prayer in his voice Fieravanti caught at a hope "for the sake of that once, for memory of these ancient ties, yes, and for a greater than these—for God and His justice—Madonna, you, too, are a Faldora, will you not plead——"

"Leave our women out of it," said her grandfather harshly. "If I cannot do a thing for its own sake will I do it because a girl whines?"

"Then for its own sake——" But as old Ascanio cut him short with an imperative gesture of a shaken hand in a finality which could not be misunderstood the sculptor's voice hardened. "No? Then every man to his conscience and I to mine. Illustrissimo, give me leave to raise a troop, I have already two——"

"Chisellers," began Carlo as Fieravanti's hand on 'Tonio's arm made clear his reference. But Faldora put an end to the discussion.

"I'll hear no more! If we are here to sup, in God's name let us sup. Count Fausto, did you know that Messer Fieravanti had just set the Arzano defences in order?"

Was it a courteous host's desire to make amends for a rebuff to a guest so much his inferior that courtesy was the more necessary? Perhaps. But Fieravanti was in no mood to respond when Alidosi, roused to interest, followed up the hint. Arzano? Yes, he had spent nearly two months in the city, but, naturally, what passed there was private to the Duke. Whereat Count Fausto, a soldier like all his class and something of a leader of men but not notorious for liberality, turned his shoulder on him, vexed that he might not pick the brains of a shrewder man than himself for nothing, and except between Alidosi and his host there was silence at the upper end of the table.

Fieravanti asked nothing better than to be left to his thoughts, though the clearing away the rubble of a man's ruined hopes is, at the best, but a sorry business. Yet

cleared away they must be if there was to be a rebuilding, nor was the sculptor a man to be daunted by failure. But he had failed, and only now that the ruin lay about him was he clearly aware how high he had built his hopes of success; surely, he had argued, this Grand Seigneur and very perfect gentleman would be moved to elemental justice? Upon that he had built, forgetting that other side of Ascanio Faldora's character against which His Grandeur had spoken warning—the pride of all the Faldora's from the days of Adam! Not for an hour would his forbears, those dispensers of high and low justice in the great hall, have endured a Lippo at their doors; but since the Church had shouldered Faldora from his place, let the peasant folk sense the difference between a near-by Faldora and a Rome far off. With the loss of his old-time power had gone the old-time responsibility: the folk were no longer his folk! So had he reasoned, not without justice.

And because of that reasoning Fieravanti had failed. Overborne by memory, feeling anew the grip of the childless woman's hold upon his knee, hearing against the sob in her throat, the wailing cry of "the children, the little innocent Maria, who ran in and out my door," he had even appealed to Carlo Faldora to show by some greatness in him that the shame of Forli might be redeemed, wiped from remembrance by a generous upholding of the highest law, sacrifice for another. But there, too, he had failed, and not there only. He had failed with Count Ascanio, failed with Alidosi, failed with—No! thank God! not with Lucia Faldora! His heart leaped within him, driving the warm blood tingling through his veins as he recalled her cry, "Would God I were a man!" Here was a Faldora who set God and right above her pride.

At that he raised his eyes, to find hers bent upon him in speculation: not at once did they shift but held his gaze steadily for a time, then, unhasting, they shifted to

Fausto Alidosi in the same speculation. Once again he had perplexed her, this peasant-born maker of saints who but for his chisel would have sat below the salt and never drawn a second thought. Now, be it said, it was not because of his saint-making that she searched out what manner of man he was: that outer shell of curiosity had been shed and a deeper kernel reached.

At first unconsciously, but now deliberately, she was weighing him against the man who had turned his shoulder upon him as upon something negligible, a slight which had offended her without the cause of offence being clear. And, as between her and Amata Capponi so now, it was again a contrast rather than a comparison since, save that each was a man good to look upon as a man, they had not one jot in common. From their skin inwards they differed, these two, differed body, soul and spirit, differed in ideals as in birth, and it was with an as yet misunderstood exultation stirring in her that Lucia Faldora told herself the contrast was not in any respect to the advantage of Alidosi of Imola.

The cruel tragedy of the Margottis had moved her to her depths. Innocent blood, the children with the mother, cried to God and man for vengeance: yes, and for something finer than vengeance, for justice in righteousness, and only this maker of saints had ears to hear or a hand to perform God's work upon earth. It was true that the Faldora pride wrapped her as in a mantle, but beneath the mantle beat that heart of tender womanhood which, drawing near to the divine, suffers with those who sorrow.

A handful of clods! For the first time the easy contempt vexed her, rousing both her resentment and her scorn. What had been an unexamined habit of thought now seemed less a truth than a contemptible hiding of cowardice behind a contempt for which there was insufficient justification. Nor had she failed to hear Fiera-

vanti's pleading with Carlo Faldora—a deed to stir a man's blood and put his past under his feet. Pleading? It was more than a pleading, more than the stirring of a man's sense of manhood, it was an offer of condonation, an opening of a way to rehabilitation, and Carlo Faldora had rejected plea, offer and open way alike. Only this peasant-born maker of saints, this stranger, had heard the call, not Faldora of Pesaro, not Alidosi of Imola, not Carlo who was to call her wife. Little wonder she had cried, "Would God I were a man," as the generous instincts of her woman's nature rose against the barriers which held her helpless, or that gratitude, admiration went out in flood to the man who, untrained in arms, no soldier and with no splendid tradition to maintain, should yet be ready to take his life in his hand in the cause of the poor.

Now, it is bad for a man when the woman he is to call wife weighs him dispassionately and finds him wanting, worse when there is no love to set in the scale as a make-weight, and yet worse still when, so weighing, she finds some other man all that the husband-to-be is not. Therein lies much food for dumb thought, but it was not because Carlo Faldora recognised this worse than bad that he sat silent.

No! That there should be a contrasting at all was to him unthinkable, still less was it possible that the chiseller should win a second thought from a woman of Faldora blood, but his vexed suspicions, his malicious will to hurt, had over stepped the bounds of wisdom, losing him a golden opportunity of forcing a double silence. Now, too late, he recognised that instead of sneering down the man he counted dangerous he should have aided him, thereby setting him at Lippo's throat to his own great advantage in making an end of both. And now, all for the sake of a

gibe he had flung the chance away unless—unless—Yes, later, in a day or two he might mend his hand, pointing out that he could not oppose his uncle at his own table. Yes, that was reasonable and an excuse ready to his hand. Meanwhile Lippo, having his spies even at Faldora of Pesaro's supper table, hearing he had been loyal would be less on guard. Perhaps, on the whole, the sneer had done no harm but, he told himself, he must not push antagonism too far lest he stir up spleen and Fieravanti should retaliate. But what did Fieravanti know? That he must discover, but how?—how? And so there was silence at the upper end of the table except between Ascanio Faldora and his chief guest.

From Arzano and its defences their talk had drifted, by what channels or of whom they spoke Fieravanti never knew, but presently Faldora's raised voice broke in upon his ponderings.

"Does his wealth better him? I cannot see it. Land, blood, and the Church, these are equals; but wealth? riches? No! Any Genoa or Venice huckster, and Jew trader, may grow rich. I'll have none of them! Let the mud of the world stay where God placed it."

"But the Church is of the people at times?"

"Yes, but it does not stay of the people. And there is this, Count Fausto, the Church cannot marry our daughters. Did you hear that we shall have a wedding shortly? Now that Lent has passed there need be no delay," and he laid a hand on the girl's arm.

"All happiness, Madonna! And the bridegroom?"

"A Faldora!" It was old Ascanio who answered: except that her face grew expressionless the bride-to-be gave no sign that she had heard. "Praised be God! the old name shall not die out. We must look to our prinkings, my girl, eh? How soon do you pass this way again,

Count Fausto? In a month? Well, we shall see, we shall see. Much may be done in a month where there is a will."

A month? Two had passed without exposure, could he risk a third? It was natural that at the question Carlo Faldora should turn in speculation to the man from whom he most feared danger. But Fieravanti's answering look baffled him: it, too, was full of speculation. A month? No! To linger through a month in uncertainty was not to be endured, he must lay his doubts to rest one way or the other. How? On the whole Lippo's way was best; the risk was small—yet suppose the man knew nothing? Why run a risk if there was no need? While certainly no coward Carlo Faldora was careful of himself as every man should be who loves the one life he has to live.

CHAPTER XVII

THE FINDING OF AN INSPIRATION

"You need a child for the Madonna's arms," 'Tonio had said that day on the Castel-Cavo road. That, too, had been Fieravanti's first conception—the Great Mother with a child caught to her sheltering breast, the small head warm in the hollow of an arm: not the Christ-child, the Christ-child would draw the thought from the central purpose; always where He is He must come first, and so no Christ-child but a nursling of the poor.

But upon second thoughts the maker of saints had set aside the conception. For one thing, it was too conventional, and he was not a man who loved convention for convention's sake; for another, clods might misconstrue. To them, because of convention, any child in the Madonna's arms must needs be the Christ-child; but also, and most compelling reason of all, it would limit the expressiveness of pose. A prettiness there might be but at the expense of vigour of life.

Therefore the iron frame to support the clay, a skeleton of gaunt bars prepared beforehand in Forli under the Master's watchful eye, thrust out a grotesque nakedness before it to right and left, a nakedness presently to be rounded into arms of invitation. The hands, slender yet strong, motherly capable hands, exquisitely moulded if true to their living model, would be open to receive, comfort and caress, and looking down between the outstretched arms he conceived a grave, sweet face where tender love and no less tender pity should seem to whisper a "Come

unto me," through the curved lips of the strong yet gentle mouth, confirming the smiled welcome of the eyes.

Yearning Mother-love, deep-hearted pity from a sorrowful foreknowledge of sorrow because of the sword which must strike through her own heart, these, surely, were the dominant characteristics of the Great Mother? For the rest, the pose should be one of welcome, an eager gathering to the sheltering arms, bare from the elbow downwards for beauty's sake, and upon the half-bent head the thin folds of a wimple by way of concession to tradition.

That was the conception and never, as the sensitive fingertips worked his will upon the wet clay, had Fieravanti's heart been so fired within him. To the glory of art? to that greater glory, the glory of God in quickening in the Brettinoro clods the divine spark latent in every soul? Something there was of these but they were not dominant. No, chiefly it was to the glory of the woman Amata Capponi had taught him he loved. He would pass and she would pass, but this would remain, and generations to come, seeing it, would say, That was Lucia Faldora; while those with the blessed gift of imagination would add, If the cold marble be like this, what must God's creation not have been? So it was his heart that strove after expression in the realisation of perfection rather than his brain.

And, perhaps for that reason, it failed him, since the heart of man is conscious of heights and depths where the mind neither soars nor plumbs. The accustomed touch of genius was there in lines and curves of beauty but the supreme conception evaded him. Beauty? Beauty was not enough. There had been beauty in the Magdalene; His Grandeur had admitted the beauty and yet, missing something greater, had said, It is not finished? No, beauty was not enough.

And yet, strive as he might with sensitive touch and delicate graving tool, the crowning glory of the conception eluded capture; always there was failure—failure his fired imagination realised in despair though it seemed hidden from others. Father Bernardo might whisper "Inspiration! A miracle!" over clasped hands, as the strong, pure face grew out in beauty from the clay; old Faldora might thaw for an instant into unwonted enthusiasm, and even Carlo admit, grudgingly, that it was good, but upon the soul of Marco Fieravanti there lay the chill sense of failure across whose blackness there struck no warmth of hope.

Beauty? Oh yes; with that calm, cold living face turned patiently to his, the head bent as it should be, the eyes veiled, he would himself have been a clod if there had not been the beauty of youth and womanhood, but that much and no more was failure. 'Tonio and 'Sandro, quitting their roughing-out of the marble when left alone, might lift the damp cloth and draw in their breath—Never had the Master done better! But Fieravanti, entering behind from a side door, would lay a hand on the shoulder of each and shake his head in silence. Luca Melone was right; the marble without a soul remains cold stone, and how can cold stone quicken the fire of heaven in clods?

Only three days had passed since the return from Forli. With the fires of enthusiasm flaming within him Fieravanti had laboured hour by hour over the face and pose of the bent head, laboured and failed: upon the fourth day a change came in this wise.

Through the forenoon Lucia had sat as usual, but at the noon dinner had begged excusal for the remainder of the day, giving no reason. Nor had Fieravanti regretted the break. With rest the paralysing sense of impotency might pass. It was just possible that, by a paradox, through over much thought clearness of vision was being blurred.

That the break might be the more complete, he left the *scarpellini* to their chiselling and took the road to the village. Lippo was not forgotten. Having failed with Faldora might he hope to rouse Brettinoro? But midway a bush by the wayside wakened a memory of Piero which turned his feet towards the lad's house. Nor was it the memory only—when sick of heart or sorry there is no such medicine as some greater need, or a sorrow which is yet more sorrowful.

The house—more hovel than house—was one of the poorest in the poor outskirts of the little town, a single room with a garret overhead. It was of a type known of old to the maker of saints, himself born to poverty—the wide bed where more than one generation had passed the gates of life and of Greater Life would stand in one far corner, raised a foot or two above the floor of beaten earth; there would be a rude table, a rough bench or two, a stool maybe, a charcoal brazier with its swung cooking-pot, an oaken chest, though to poverty that was doubtful, a cupboard against the wall and, possibly, hanks of dried herbs hung from the ceiling.

The broad door, which was also the sole window except for a small grating high in the wall, stood wide open and Fieravanti would have entered without the ceremony of knocking had not Lucia Faldora's voice stayed him on the threshold. She was singing softly, a crooning, rushing song, soothing sound rather than words; then, very quietly, very gently, with hardly a break in the crooning note, he heard her speak.

"She sleeps, I think."

"Always you could quiet her, Madonna." The answering voice was less soft but no less subdued. "Sleep's her medicine, and not even I could rock her to rest. If she lives, Madonna——"

"But she will—she must. Oh pray God, yes—yes," and

again the quiet, hushing wordless song, infinitely gentle, infinitely soothing, reached Fieravanti as he crept forward.

With the sun to the west he cast no shadow through the south-turned doorway, but the strong light left no part of the square room unsearched, revealing the bare needs of life he had pictured in his mind. But neither the bareness, nor the scrupulous care which gave the bareness that dignity which the most pinching poverty can always assert, were heeded: even the mother, leaning forward from the corner of a settle, her hands clasped between her knees, her lined face set in the stress of anxious suspense, held his gaze only for an instant.

How else, when Lucia Faldora faced him in just such a pose, just such a grouping, as his first conception of the Great Mother? There was the watchful face stooped above the child of his imagining, the small head caught in the hollow of an arm, the small body in the patches of the poor held comforted against the warm breast: Lucia Faldora, but a new Lucia, a Lucia he had never yet seen, a Lucia scarcely even imagined, a Lucia with the ice melted from the heart of tender, womanly sympathy and the stony mask of pride loosed from the face.

A saint in the making? Better than that, greatly better—a soul that did not know its own saintlikeness, a spirit that forgot itself in the needs of another, a deep-hearted mother-yearning worthy to guide small feet to greater heights than up the empty stairways of life, a woman meet for a man's love. The first conception must return; he would throw aside his four days labour, the labour that had failed, and out of this reincarnation—Then, as the child in her arm stirred, sighing the deep breath of contented weariness as she slept, there broke across the stooped face a sudden exquisite softness, the full, strong lips trembled in response to some deep chord within, trembled

and fell into form as if they whispered, "Come unto me," and a smile tender and pitiful, a smile which was less a smile than a light upon the face, made a glory whose revelation set the heart of the maker of saints shivering.

The first conception? No! There should be no change! He knew now where he had failed, he knew now how to catch that soul of motherhood which is love, and yet something more than love in its tender wistfulness, and so fix it in the marble that no clod could be so cloddish as to be unmoved. Shaken, he stirred and the girl glanced up, unhasting and with no break in the watchful care. Nor was there any confusion in her eyes as they met his, the wistful tenderness still lingered and again Fieravanti shivered to the very heart. Carlo Faldora! God in heaven! he cried dumbly, what should he do that a Carlo Faldora might not wreck the tenderness, nor set a careless foot on the love which gave it strength?

"A summer fever," she said softly. "For two days she has not slept, the poverina, but now I think at last all's well."

Duller of ear, the mother had not heard; now she turned, staring. "The signor of the gold piece," she whispered. "Signorina, you heard of it? This is the signor himself."

"Yes, I heard." Such a smile as Fieravanti had never yet seen broke over her face, so friendly-warm was it. "It was well done, Ser Marco."

"If so, what of this?" answered Fieravanti, his gaze shifting to the sleeping child. Whereat the mother, in the hot-blooded impulse of her race, laid a hand on the girl's knee as she cried, always softly:

"It is life, signor, life. Nothing I, the mother look you, nothing I could do would soothe her. Always she moaned and wailed, tossing, tossing, tossing; yet look now! Look!"

"The Great Mother," said Fieravanti, and at the unconscious warmth in his voice the girl stooped again above the child in her arms. Why? She could not have told; but there are instincts in nature which are obeyed without being understood. "The Great Mother!" he repeated. "Madonna, you need sit no more—all's caught beyond forgetting; nature is greater than any man's imaginings. Mother, is there aught needed for the little one?"

"With the Madonna here? No, signor, no! Pray God, we'll see her own in her arms some day!" But if either of the listeners echoed the prayer neither said Amen!

Certainly Fieravanti, as, after a few more whispered words of cheer and thankfulness, he returned to the Casa more swiftly than he had come out, and with a new riot of blood through his veins, had no such prayer in his heart. How was it possible, with the shadow of Carlo Faldora black across the path?

Having turned both 'Tonio and 'Sandro out from the work-room he stood a long five minutes before the clay with closed eyes, recalling with all his strength of will and memory that revelation which would turn failure into consummate achievement, then, the vision clear, the mental grasp strong and firm, the conception of the Great Mother, motherhood incarnate, motherhood whose heart of love overflows in wistful, solicitous pity, and yet tastes through foreknowledge of suffering the sorrows which must be while it gives praise for the joys, took life in the clay under the subtle touch of comprehension.

Nor with, as it were, the foundations laid was it so long in the doing. Here the smoothing of a hardness, there the rounding of a curve, the widening of a nostril, the shortening of a lip, the deepening of a line, touches so little in themselves that each was nothing, or almost nothing, and yet the whole a transformation, the miracle of a soul breaking through clay to life. Unhasting he

worked, unceasing save for a stern reckoning of effect, a yet sterner matching with the vision always clear before his mind, and when at last he ended he knew that it was good.

More than that. If opposites teach so do similitudes. He knew now where his Magdalene had failed. There, too, there had been, there was, beauty cold as there had been cold beauty in this clay; but Luca Melone was right, the soul is the last of life to be born, and neither with the fingers nor the chisel had he caught the soul of the woman who had loved much. There had been the failure: that which had worked the Magdalene's redemption was missing, the tenderness which needs must come through loving much. Now through Lucia Faldora he had found it as Melone had said he would. To give a soul to the marble would be less easy than to this clay; but it could be done: His Grandeur would yet say, "It is the Magdalene's self in saintship," and no longer have any reservation of doubt.

CHAPTER XVIII

"TO SAVE MADONNA LUCIA"

His hands locked, with chin on breast and brows drawn, the Maker of Saints studied the face looking downward into his from under the thin wimple whose folds, falling to the shoulders as yet scarcely suggested, merged into the clay mass. The birth of a soul? here in the clay? the Magdalene's in the marble? Yes, it was no less a miracle, but how wrought? Through his art? his inspiration? Decisively Fieravanti said No, to both. Whence, then? "She loved much!" Through love?

Yes; there the Magdalene found both herself and her redemption, but while that was true of her what of Lucia Faldora? Yes, and of Lucia Faldora also, since only through love is that greatness we call soul stirred to life, but love of what? of whom? The child, the little Marietta caught to her breast? "She is good to the poor she comes —sometimes," Piero had said. Sometimes? Does such a stirring to life come through the haps and chances of a sometimes? Scarcely; and yet—and yet——

"Dio mio!" It was Father Bernardo's voice at his shoulder. *"Dio mio, Dio mio,"* he said three times over and stood silent as Fieravanti stepped aside. Then, "Lucia! Yes, it is Lucia herself and yet not Lucia, it is more than Lucia, greater than—No, not greater than Lucia but greater than I dreamed she was. Ah, Ser Marco, we do not always know our dearest. That is Lucia and—The Mother? Yes, yes, yes, but the Mother-to-be, the Mother of the Annunciation. Wait here my son, wait until I

bring Count Ascanio to see this miracle—for which God be thanked!"

But he had scarcely left the workshop when the door was pushed open and left open—that was Carlo Faldora's way. Always it had been a fret to the sculptor that he could not reckon on being left alone with his labour; at any moment some one or other might break in: it had been the priest, now it was Carlo Faldora.

Crunching noisily underfoot the marble chips scattered by the *scarpellini* in their roughing out of the block he stood a moment before the clay with pursed lips. Always the model stirred the unclean spirit in him, at times to some ironic sarcasm, some sourness which in its itch to hurt hinted more than the carping words, or else to a tolerant patronising approval which Fieravanti found yet harder to endure with patience. Now remembering the purpose which had brought him to the workroom, he strove to put a curb upon his temper.

"Um! Good, yes, good—but is it Madonna Lucia? Never have I seen her like that! You are more fortunate, Ser Marco, but then you are——" Hastily he checked the accustomed gibe, substituting smoother words, "You are the Seer, the maker of saints——"

"I see nothing which is not there for all to see."

"Um—perhaps not; no! of course not." Remembering suddenly that there was a point to be gained he grew friendly, laying a familiar hand on Fieravanti's arm with the intimate gesture of one who grows confidential. "If that is the true Lucia—well! a saint has her use for clods in a chapel, but for a man's wife, day in day out, the Great Mother would be—Ah! I see! the mother of one's children? Yes, yes, that is different and explains everything. A little saintship is no harm for that, and there are always warmer-blooded women in the world."

"In Forli, for instance?" Fieravanti's cold distaste was

profound, but Faldora, intent on his own purpose, failed to note the censure. He had been raking his brains to find excuse for such an intimate association as might lead to the salving of his doubts. Now, stirred by Fieravanti's last words, a method suggested itself which, with characteristic shameless audacity, he seized upon.

"Forli? Yes, in Forli. For instance, were I of your trade I would choose Amata Capponi as my model. By Holy Paul! there's little of the saint in Amata Capponi. Ser Marco, you have been mewed up long enough in this workshop of yours. Come and throw a cast of dice with me and while we play we'll talk of the Castello and Amata Capponi."

"No, Signor Faldora." With an abrupt movement Fieravanti shook off the hand still lying on his sleeve. "Neither one nor the other. Your luck with dice is too—notorious."

"Notorious? Notorious?" Faldora drew back. Almost—the wish being father to the thought—he had persuaded himself that the exposure at the Castello was unknown; now, in the surprise of the disillusion, there was more fear than wrath in his blustering protest. "Do you dare to hint—do you presume—By my name, Messer Fieravanti——"

"Swear by something you have not dishonoured, something you have not dragged in the mud for all the world to spit contempt upon, but see you swear no lie."

"Lie?" In a flash Lippo's advice and his own secret jest, sword against chisel, came back to him. Here was his quarrel ready made. Not even so punctilious a host as his uncle could complain if the lie direct were met with a sword-thrust. Why, the honour of his House demanded it! With a jerk he half drew the blade at his hip then drove it ringing into its sheath again. "By all the devils you'll answer me for this!"

"No! Let him answer me!" From the open door, beyond whose frame stood Father Bernardo, his soutane a blotch of darkness in the shadows of the passage, Count Ascanio strode forward. "Our name in the mud? Ser Marco, if you were not a guest, old as I am I would drive the lie——"

"Illustrissimo, this is between Signor Carlo and me."

"But I say no! I am Faldora of Pesaro, and while I live the honour of our name is in my keeping. Being who you are and what you are I cannot lay my own hands upon you, but for the lie my scullions——"

"But if it is no lie?" A maker of saints, but no meek saint himself, Fieravanti's voice rose in turn as he again broke in upon the hot torrent of indignant passion. "Lie? Take care, Illustrissimo; the word is hard to swallow."

"Yet—swallow it!"

"You mistake. It is you—you, Faldora of Pesaro who must swallow it when you know the truth."

"The truth? In God's name, man, what truth?"

"Ask Girolamo Ordelaffi."

"Ordelaffi? I ask an Ordelaffi if my honour, the honour of Faldora, stands where it stood in Forli? Impossible! But what should such as you know of what belongs to my own respect! What truth, I say, what truth?"

"Ask Signor Faldora."

"Carlo?" Round he swung, his fierce old eyes aflame, passion hot in the patches of dull red burning the cheek bones of the lean face. Then as he read defiance rather than indignation in Carlo Faldora's scowl he drew back a step, breathing hard, and there was silence until he whispered to himself "In the mud? Our name in the mud? Carlo—Carlo, what is this he says?"

"A lie," answered Carlo Faldora, but sullenly and without assertion and again there was silence. Presently Ascanio Faldora broke it.

"Fetch Lucia," he said, speaking curtly across his shoulder to Father Bernardo in the background.

"No, Illustrissimo, no," protested Fieravanti, "This is between man and man: why force our quarrel on the Madonna?"

"Leave us to cleanse our honour our own way. Between man and man? No! It touches my grand-daughter as it touches me. Either she marries Carlo Faldora to-day or —Go, Father, go as I bid you." Nor did he or either speak again until the priest returned, bringing Lucia Faldora.

Closing the door he stood aside, ready to intervene when intervention would be service. A wise man, Father Bernardo, he knew there are times when men's passions are best left to burn themselves out, let scorch what they will, times when peace-mongering is fuel to fire or a blast to spread the flames roaring yet more fiercely. For the moment, silence was his truest friendship. As to the girl, she looked uncomprehendingly from one to the other but, if any had had eyes to see, it was on Fieravanti that the troubled questioning rested longest. To him Ascanio Faldora turned.

"Now, your accusation and your proof?"

"As I said before I say again, for both ask Ordelaffi." The answer was as curt and as cold as the question.

"Ask Ordelaffi! Oh, yes, ask Ordelaffi! Ordelaffi is in Forli!" and Carlo Faldora laughed, jeering. Catching at his one straw of hope he had decided on his line of action. To kill the truth was impossible, but he might choke it silent for four days and in four days much might happen—much might happen that very hour.

"It is for me to speak." His uncle's voice had lost nothing of its cold curtness. "Leave Ordelaffi aside and put your accusation in plain words, Messer Fieravanti."

"This, then—when in Forli in March last he played

with cogged dice at the Castello, had them broken before his eyes and was flung out into the street as a cheat."

"A lie," said young Faldora, this time between shut teeth. "A lie—a lie."

"Ask Ordelaffi," repeated Fieravanti.

"How did you know this?" If possible Faldora's voice was colder, sterner.

"I was present in the Castello, heard Conti inform Ordelaffi, saw—the door close."

"In March? If this be true you have known it almost three months and yet have kept silence—why?"

"I was a stranger. Even now it is surprise that has dragged it to light. For one reason only would I have spoken."

"And that reason?"

"To save Madonna Lucia."

Four words curtly dropped, spoken harshly even, yet they set the girl's heart fluttering. Vigilantly, perplexedly, she had been following the give and take of brusque question and no less brusque reply, now the unexpected use of her name startled her. So this was what was in his mind that day by the sundial when, as he had said, she had so scourged him with her scorn that he was driven to protest that Lucia Faldora was nothing to him? At the moment that had seemed natural, necessary; it was self-evident, a matter of course that a Faldora could be nothing to a Fieravanti in the sense in which any woman is much to any man, but now the memory hurt. Not that it was any less a matter of course, not that a Marco Fieravanti could ever be anything to a Lucia Faldora, but—but—she had never met just such a man, and——

Lifting her eyes to his she faced him steadily. With the air so charged with passion it was natural that a flush should warm her cheeks, but—did love truly come first? before land and blood and pride of race? Instantly,

and it was all, as it were, in the illumination of a flash which flares its revelation for an instant then dies to darkness, she brushed aside the question unanswered, or if there was an undetermined answer it was that to a man who held her as nothing love certainly did not come first; not the pride of race but the pride of her womanhood made that clear. Yet he had taken thought for her: that far she was in his debt.

"Thank you, signor," she said, as softly and yet as distinctly as, at the supper-table, once before she had used the words. Ascanio Faldora allowed no opportunity for reply.

"Leave Madonna Lucia's name aside. Now that—I use your words—surprise has dragged this—this—assertion to light, what proof have you?"

"My word, Count Ascanio."

"Um—your word against Carlo's? Your word against——"

"My oath," said Carlo Faldora, clinging to his hope of four days respite. "A lie," he asserted, his voice firmer. "By our name, a lie!"

"That oath does not hold. How could it? If this vile story be true you are swearing by that which you have fouled. No! Swear by the Holy Rood of Loreto, whereon who swears falsely is damned, and I shall believe you—your oath against a guest's word."

There was a pause as Carlo Faldora hesitated, shooting a glance at Count Ascanio's set face. Passion had passed or was held in check, but the lines scored by time upon forehead and temple seemed deeper, notably deeper, than an hour before, and the lean face thinner at the mouth; then he raised an open hand. But before words came Father Bernardo spoke: as he had once said; he knew his Carlo—a little.

"Not alone that: but whoso swears falsely on the Holy

Rood dies within the year; that is well known and proved a score of times. Now swear, my son."

For a moment the open hand wavered in the air, shaking, then it fell slowly.

"You have my oath already—I'll swear no more."

Through the silence Faldora drew a heavy sigh, so heavy it seemed to pass from him in a shudder; but no new storm of passion swept him. If he stirred at all it was to stiffen yet more rigidly upright as a greyness stole creeping across the weather-bitten tan of his cheeks; once or twice he swallowed as if some dryness in the throat choked him, once or twice, too, his fingers gripped and loosed a fold of cloth at his thigh. Slowly he turned to Father Bernardo, who stood nearest the door.

"Father, of your courtesy order Signor Roverella's horse to be made ready. He is leaving without delay." Then he turned his back on Carlo Faldora.

Roverella? Roverella was the name of Carlo Faldora's mother before her marriage; never again did Faldora of Pesaro speak of his nephew by the name he had stained.

Not for an instant did the priest hesitate. If, before, silence had been wisdom to attempt a patching now was to pull the rent wider. But Carlo Faldora, as he followed from the workshop, paused and turned as he had turned at the door of Ordelaffi's reception hall.

"There's an end to your Great Mother!" he said, sneering, "but not an end to Faldora of Pesaro. I'll be that yet! Great Mother? Perhaps that too! But she may thank God if men call her wife!" and with a fling of the hand he was gone.

Ignoring the outburst as if it had never been Count Ascanio turned to the clay. "An inspiration, Ser Marco," he said, slowly nodding a grave approval. "Surely it is the Great Mother herself—surely—surely."

Thus, after the manner of strong men, he retied his

broken threads. But Fieravanti, standing silent by his side, asked himself, What of the small feet which were to waken the echoes of the empty stairs? The grey, stern face of Faldora of Pesaro gave no reply to the question: though the hopes of his House lay wrecked beyond all possibility of rebuilding he gave no sign. But that was Faldora of Pesaro.

CHAPTER XIX

REVELATION

When Fieravanti had said to Lucia Faldora, You need sit no more, he had overrun the truth in the enthusiasm of the moment. For the face, no; but there yet remained much to be done in the modelling of the outstretched arms and hands of invitation—especially the hands. These, with their slender grace, their hint of power, their beauty in strength, must be as revealing as the face of the Madonna herself; and so through the days which followed the sittings continued as before.

Yet not quite as before. No such crisis could come and go and leave life as it had been. Therefore there was at once a new bond and a new barrier; but of the full bond neither was conscious, each believing the other free, while the woman was stone cold as never before. That was natural since two things shamed her grievously—that she, Lucia Faldora, should love a peasant born Marco Fieravanti was bad, but that she should love a man who gave her no second thought, love him even after he had said, What is Lucia Faldora to me! was infinitely worse, shaming both her Faldora pride and her womanhood. So, being at least honest to herself and not denying that love had stolen on her unawares, the ice froze as never before lest through the warmth of the comprehension born out of little Marietta's need it should thaw into revelation.

It was a strange situation, each stirred to the depths by the other's nearness but only in the depths; each passion-

ately aware of the other's dearness yet coldly choking back the knowledge lest even for an instant it should look out o' window, and dishonour that reserve which each held to be true honour.

So, coldly, indifferently, with neither apparent interest nor open repugnance, she submitted her hands to his touch, holding her breath the while lest, quickening, it should betray how that touch thrilled her; and he, on his part, touched so lightly, so indifferently, that the reluctant finger-tips hinted distaste, the compulsion of a necessary task, fearing every instant that control might slip and the passing touch quicken to the caress he hungered after yet steeled himself against. That there should be a Fieravanti pride as strong as any Faldora arrogance of birth would have astonished her, but so it was. And these repressions were the more difficult, the more needful, because they were now alone as never at the first; 'Tonio and 'Sandro having roughed-out the marble as far as the Master would permit there was nothing to keep them in the workshop.

But for the draperies no sitting was required, and so Fieravanti was solitary when, on the fifth day after Carlo Faldora's exposure, Tribalda closed the door of the workshop behind him with care unusual in the Captain of the Guard. A close friendship had grown up between these two, so close and understanding that Fieravanti, with the acuteness of perception which lay so near to the roots of his power, ceasing work waited expectantly.

"Bad news?"

"The worst—Young Faldora has joined Lippo."

Wiping his hands with a cloth which had lain across a shoulder Fieravanti flung it aside. The action was mechanical, but to Tribalda it carried a significance.

"To Lippo? Then at last he has turned honest."

"Honest, do you call it? With Lippo, and honest?"

"To be an open scoundrel is a kind of honesty. To Lippo? Then less than ever can I hope that Count Ascanio will make an end of that cruel devil, as Margotti truly called him. Margotti! God's name, Tribalda, think of it—under the stones of their own burnt roof because Lippo said, Leave them there! and neither the Church nor Faldora of Pesaro will stir a finger!"

"I am not so sure." Tribalda spoke slowly. Clearly he was very troubled.

"But how can he, now that Carlo Faldora——"

"Just because of Carlo Faldora. I know the Illustrissimo as you cannot. Pride, Fieravanti, pride may move him. Why? To show the world that Faldora of Pesaro sets justice before his own flesh."

"That is why you said your news was the worst possible?"

"No, not just that." Tribalda paused, the lines deepening on his grave face. Commonly he took life lightly, did Tribalda, but now the burden lay heavy upon him.

"Why then? Oh, if it is Faldora's private affairs say nothing."

"If there is cause for fear at all it will not be private for long! I always thought Carlo Faldora had the coming years in his mind, the time when he would lord it in his uncle's place—fill that place he never could—but now —now I am wondering if of late, since that damning night at Forli, he has not been preparing for what may come."

"And what may come? and where?"

"Lippo—here."

"Lippo? Here? And Carlo Faldora preparing it?" Uncomprehending Fieravanti shook his head. "I do not understand you, Tribalda."

"Carlo Faldora was to succeed his uncle, Carlo Faldora was to marry Madonna Lucia: is Carlo Faldora the man to lose—not the Madonna, there was no love there, but to

lose Faldora and all Faldora stands for? By all your saints, Fieravanti, no! And now he has Lippo at his back—Lippo who burned the children with the mother."

"Lippo? You know how I have tried to rouse Brettinoro against him and failed, but let Lippo touch Faldora and from Arzano to the sea, from Imola to Ancona, all Romagna would rise——"

"Let it rise! With such a bribe as Carlo Faldora could pay—if he succeeded—Lippo and all his scoundrels could disappear with full pockets. Disappear? There would be no need! There's a score of lordlings, great and small, who would hire them and keep them busy in this cockpit of ours."

"If he succeeded—yes! But Faldora is no peasant's house to be burnt at the end of a night's ride. How many men have you?"

"That's not the question, but—How many can I trust? Always we know Lippo had his spies among us: you heard the Count himself at the supper-table? Then, as I said, Carlo Faldora has been busy of late. God may know who is loyal, I do not! Not for certain, that is. Some, oh yes, some I can count upon, but, Fieravanti, it rots the very spirit to know there's treason at your elbow."

"But let us have sense, Tribalda, let us have sense. Carlo Faldora would damn himself. Suppose he failed——"

"Yes," said the Captain of the Guard grimly, "Without doubt he is damned if he fails. In our cockpit failure is the unforgivable offence! Failure damns! But if he succeeds? Think, Fieravanti, think. Is there a single city strung along the Via Emilia which has not changed masters through blood and violence? Not one! Son against father at times, and who has made protest against the parricide? No man! Come nearest home. Take Forli? Is it twenty years since Ordelaffi—Ordelaffi with no more claim to hold Forli than I have to hold Faldora—

is it twenty years, I say, since Ordelaffi drove out Faggiuola? Who protested? Who drew sword for Faggiuola? No man! No! From Arzano to the sea, from Imola to Ancona, we are too busy holding what we have, but what is not ours, to care an obolus whether a Carlo succeeds an Ascanio at Faldora—let Faldora look to himself! Lippo? Yes, they would hang Lippo—or hire him to cut another throat!"

Answering nothing Fieravanti turned to the open window and stood looking out across the garden's flecking of sun and shade. Answer? What answer but the one was possible? Tribalda was right, terribly right. From Rimini to the great river in the north the Emilian Way was strewn with proof. Nor was stronger proof possible than that which his own city flung in his face. Forli? How often in a hundred years had Forli changed its overlords—not with its own consent! Mestaguerra, Pagano, Faggiuola, all had gripped power in turn and all in turn been flung out in blood. Ordelaffi? Tribalda was right. Ordelaffi had no more claim to rule in Forli than he had —less! since Ordelaffi was not even Forli born. Would Ordelaffi lift a finger to avenge Ascanio Faldora if, with Lippo's help, Carlo seized the shrivelled lordship? Not he! Would Alidosi? No, nor Alidosi! Alidosi had his own grip to hold. Cesena, then? No again! Cesena was in the hands of another Ordelaffi who dared no peradventure beyond his gates lest they should be shut on his back, and as swift and vile an end be made of all his blood as had befallen Margotti.

What then? This—for its salvation Faldora must look to Faldora. That Tribalda had grounds for his fears Fieravanti never doubted. Carlo Faldora was doubly damned and only by some such success, the success of brutality and murder which passed uncensured and unchallenged because these breathed the very spirit of the

times: only by some such success could he find rehabilitation. Let him seize and hold Faldora, hold it with a strong hand, and sufficient of his world would condone the past, accept the present and smooth the future to make life tolerable.

Nor could it be forgotten that, cheat and dishonourer of his name though he was, no man called Carlo Faldora coward. Rash? Reckless? Foolhardy? No, none of these; cautious and calculating but yet no coward. With little to lose and all to gain he might be trusted to play Lippo as boldly as he had played his cogged dice. What else had his final threat meant as he had flung out of that very door.

At the recollection Fieravanti went suddenly hot until his scalp prickled. At the time it had seemed nothing worse than coarse vapouring, a braggart covering of an ignoble retreat, but not now, not now. Carlo Faldora was that kind of scoundrel. Faldora must look to Faldora. Better the flaming roof should bury their bones as it buried Margotti's, the children with the mother, than that Carlo Faldora should wrest and hold possession—Carlo Faldora with his accursed will to be vile. Turning abruptly he faced Tribalda.

"Let Faldora look to itself! You are right; I see no other way. Have you warned Count Ascanio?"

"No. And is it necessary? Why fret him? Cannot we two——"

"It is his right. It is no longer Faldora against Lippo—it is Faldora against Faldora and his right to know. My advice is, Go to him and at once."

"Come, then," said Tribalda. "Let us both go."

But Fieravanti shook his head. "Would he thank me? You? yes, for it is your duty, but who is Marco Fieravanti that he should thrust his fingers unasked into Faldora's affairs? It would be an offence. And, listen, Tribalda—

there is time to root out traitors and put honest men in their place. Urge it."

But when, having told his news—news which was received without one word of surprise, anger, denunciation or even simple comment—Tribalda urged a riddance of those whom he thought doubtful in the little garrison, and an augmentation of strength in their place he was met by a flat refusal.

"Treason? Are you sure?"

"Sure enough to be doubtful, signor."

"But not sure enough to hang them?"

"No, signor, but we rid ourselves——"

"To rid ourselves is to strengthen signors Lippo and Roverella: rogue would join rogue. As for augmentation, would you have me go in fear of cut-purse thieves? We have fallen I grant, Tribalda, but, praise God! not so low as that!"

"Then, signor, let us be the first to move: let us attack this Lippo while he is unprepared."

"Lippo? Do not omit Signor Roverella, I beg. But again, no! What? Have five lain buried under Margotti's ruins these many weeks while I stirred no finger, and would you have me move now? Can I fight in my own uncertain quarrel when I would strike no blow for the helpless? No! What I said at the first I say now: let Lippo touch the honour of Faldora with but a finger-tip and I'll strike, but not till then. Let the Church cleanse its own house."

"Then, signor, what orders do you give me?"

"None, Tribalda, none. Let all be as all has been."

"May I talk with Messer Fieravanti, signor?"

"Why should you. What is all this to him?"

"Two things," answered Tribalda bluntly. "His life is at hazard as much as ours and the responsibility for the

defence lies on me, and, frankly, signor, I am afraid."

"Talk to him whom you will," answered Faldora testily. "Since every scullion knows all that is to be known why not this Fieravanti?" Which did not exactly mean that in his own mind he ranked the maker of saints with the scullions, though the outburst savoured that way.

With that Tribalda was forced to be content, but out of so much that was negative two or three truths emerged by inference—That Faldora refused to admit that Signor Roverella's joining Lippo touched the Faldora honour; that he did not doubt Carlo would venture all to gain all, never once was that suggestion combatted, and, clearest truth of all, the Faldora pride had abated no jot of its assertive arrogance.

And Count Ascanio's permission that the maker of saints might be consulted openly had one most unlooked-for result.

It was in the late afternoon that Tribalda had brought his news to the workshop and next morning Madonna Lucia gave the sculptor a sitting for the shaping of the arms. Commonly they spoke little when thus alone, Fieravanti assuming an absorption in his work and the girl finding a refuge from danger in the coldness of silence: even indifferent speech leads at times to self forgetfulness, and in forgetfulness the mask may slip. But now, pausing in the moulding of a rounded arm just free from its loose sleeve, Fieravanti spoke.

"Madonna, you have been very patient with the sculptor, would you be as patient with the man if he presumed to advise—as a friend? Do not go to the village; better still, do not go abroad at all."

"Why?"

"Signorina, is it necessary to explain at large? cannot a friend advise——?"

"Oh," said she, defence driving her to exaggeration and beyond reason, but smiling the while that she might not let it be seen that it was defence, "are there not friends and friends?"

"I rank myself no nearer than I dare," he answered. "Madonna, keep to the Casa garden, I beg."

"Why? I am no child to be bidden do this or that for my own good and no reason given."

"There is danger from Lippo."

"From Lippo? When there is danger from Lippo my grandfather will warn me."

Again defence drove her to exaggeration. Almost there was reproof in her voice, rebuke, a bidding him mind his own business, which was to make saints out of marble and not watch over a woman who, he had avowed, was nothing to him. But Fieravanti went too much in fear to be silenced as she had silenced him in the garden; only the very coldness put him off his guard.

"Think of me how you will," he answered, "but I would be less than a man if, with so much at hazard, I did not risk displeasing you. Madonna, for the love of Christ, keep yourself guarded. Would you break all our hearts? Count Ascanio does not understand as—as—we do."

"Oh," she said lightly, mockingly even, since for the moment mockery was defence, "hearts are not so easily broken."

His answer was a gesture of the hands flung out apart, then caught together as he turned from her as if in despair. But she had caught the pain in his eyes, had understood the unconscious revelation, and in that instant one of her two causes for shame was plucked out wholly by the roots. If she had given love unasked it had not been love undesired or unreturned.

But even while the woman in her triumphed, glorying as she trembled a little, looking aside to hide the surrender

of her eyes, the custom of a life-time came upon her in a flood. Did love come first? Land, blood and the Church were equals. Already, within the week, a Faldora had failed Faldora; was she no truer to the traditions of her name?

"Messer Fieravanti," she said sharply, "do we finish to-day or do we not?"

"To-day, signorina," he answered, and they spoke no more as he worked.

But the request he made Tribalda, that when Madonna Lucia went abroad she should be close guarded whether she would or no, need not have been urged. Perhaps it was the summer heat, now flaming to its fiercest, but the shade of the garden contented her that day and onwards.

CHAPTER XX

THE KITES GATHER

"THERE are two kinds of fools in the world," said Lippo, "two kinds amongst many, you understand—the fool who grasps more than he can grip and so loses everything, and he who does not grasp at all. Now, which would I be, I wonder?"

"Neither," answered Carlo Faldora, "neither; you would be the wise man who grasps and grips."

"So you say, because it suits you to say it. But—always with respect, of course—I have less confidence in your wisdom than I once had. And with reason, you'll admit. There you were, a Faldora to be sure but a Faldora of nothing at all, and Count Ascanio lifts you out of your nothing to be Faldora of Pesaro in God's good time—or earlier, if you saw your way to a hastening. But you were not content. No! A purse, passing lean, perhaps, compared with your capacity for spending, but still a purse of a sort, filled the empty pocket; a wife with all Faldora in her shoes waited for the priest and his book, but you were not content. You must needs rattle the devil's dicebox down in Forli——"

"Let that be, Lippo. That is past——"

"By your leave," said Lippo, breaking in without ceremony, "but that is where you are wrong. Nothing is ever past so long as its consequences remain, and one consequence is that you may whistle for your bride, and, what is worse, whistle for her shoes but neither will come to

heel. And so what's past is mose damnably present—which brings us where we were. You must needs, I say, rattle cogged dice to make the lean purse fatter, and so for the sake of a hoof you lose your bullock, hide, horns and all.

"And there is more than that. There you were, fair warned that ruin lay behind the door, yet you did not slam it shut, lock, bolt and bar it while you might. What? In these three months were there not ways, whether by the priest and his book or a careful anticipation of God's good time—accidents befall in this uncertain world—which would have made all safe? But no! You bite your fingers, you hem, you haw, you stand first on one leg then on the other, until both legs are tripped up and you in the mud! And now you cry, 'Lippo crack your skull, the only skull you have, against the great door of Faldora, all because I was a fool!' No! To my sorrow I have less confidence in your wisdom than I once had; and so, by your leave I'll take thought lest one fool should make many."

All through the sour humour of the long monologue Carlo Faldora sat silent, literally biting the fingers Lippo had seen him gnaw in metaphor. Always the thief had treated him with doubtful respect, but already he was learning the difference between Carlo Faldora, heir presumptive, and Carlo Faldora outcast and disowned: the doubtful respect had passed in a stride to no respect at all, hardly even was there a show of equality. Respect? Equality? No! There was open contempt and scarcely less open insolence, nor dared he resent either. To quarrel with Lippo was to quarrel with his one hope of regaining all his folly had flung away.

Yes, folly was the word. And yet, should he blame himself? What had led to it all? Those accursed cogged dice? But that had seemed so simple. Who would sus-

pect Faldora of Pesaro? Why, his very name was a safeguard. But—yes, there had been a folly. Because of the safeguard it had been too simple, too easy, too sure, and he had allowed security to lure him into an unwise frequency of winning. That, he saw now—had seen it ever since that damned night in the Castello, that truly had been folly.

Then, too, Lippo was right over the waste of the last three months. There should have been an accident—and yet, no! That would not have served either. The marriage first, the accident after, or Lucia might have cried off and the accident bring him nothing but its risk. The marriage first, yes: but was it his fault that Lent had been late? that there could be no marriage until Easter had passed? True, he should have been more ardent, more lover-like. He paused in his backward cast of thought and grinned with bared teeth. Lover-like? Let him persuade Lippo to this venture and she would find him lover-like; oh yes, by Holy Paul! she would find him lover-like! But through these three months he had been unwise. Had he importuned, grown passionate, sworn devotion, urged—oh, urged many things and played the fool as lovers do, old Ascanio would have fixed the marriage for the first day the Church approved. Then let the accident come! Fieravanti and his "To save Madonna Lucia?" Bah; at the worst he would have bought Fieravanti. Such cattle are always for sale. He might have had to bid high but it would have come cheaper than Lippo.

Well, he had been a fool, let that be admitted. Now the only cure was to mesh Lippo and through him grip all his folly had lost—but without the burden of a bride with sour milk in her veins instead of red blood. And then? Then to rid himself of Lippo would not, at least should not, be difficult. For the rest, he knew his world. Success would be a swift repairer to a cracked reputation.

A whitener? More than a whitener, a gilder of foul smirches, so thick a gilder that not one trace of the mud would show through!

But first Lippo must be won. How? From under his bent brows Faldora glanced across the table at his companion's face and the insolence in the cruelly hard eyes drove him to a decision. Boldness was his best hope and, be it remembered, Carlo Faldora was no coward where caution would not serve him.

"Fool? Fool is easily said," he declared brusquely. "But it is you who will be the fool if you refuse. Come now, I'll be as frank as you were. What are you? A road pick-purse—nothing more! And what will the end be? The end of all your trade—six inches of steel in the ribs or a rope under the nearest tree! Oh, you may glower; but it's true, and you know it. Now here is your way out. With five hundred ducats in your pouch who will question Signor Filippo What-name-you-will? Never a soul! The risk? Who is denying the risk? Not I, since I share it! But any day in a roadside brawl for a fistful of copper sols you may find that steel in your ribs and there's an end to you. That, for the risk!" and Faldora snapped his fingers. "Fool, say you? Fool yourself, say I! Come, Lippo, we have been comrades, you and I, why not again, if for the last time?" That it would be the last time he had clearly decided. Once the success of the assault was assured, why Lippo himself had said that accidents befall in this uncertain world.

"Comrades? Yes, I have taken my risk of steel in the ribs, you your share of the fistful of copper sols!"

But though Lippo spoke sourly there was less of the aggressive insolence in his tone. The truth was he had long since decided upon the venture but, according to the cunning of his kind, hid his decision that he might drive a harder bargain. He saw eye to eye with Tribalda.

Let him succeed in this and he would pass in one stride from a wayside thief of copper sols to the ranks of the condottiere with a sword to sell to the highest bidder. But meanwhile he had his bargain to drive, and so grew almost civil; an abatement of insolence would smooth the way lest Faldora take offence.

"Not that you have not done all I've asked," he went on, conciliation clearer with every sentence. "But for your warning I would have mishandled a wasp's nest more than once. We will call the past even, Signor Carlo. Now comes this venture of yours; but a fistful of sols by the roadside is one thing and to sack Faldora——"

"Sack Faldora? I'll have no sacking, Lippo. Your pay is your pay."

Lippo whistled derisively, "What? We crack the shell and you eat the kernel? Do you call that comradeship? Crack the nut for yourself, Signor Carlo, I'll have none of it," which, it will be remembered was just Lippo's way of driving his bargain.

"And with the kernel gone, of what use would the cracked shells be to me? Now you are the fool who grasps too much and so grips nothing."

"But," remonstrated Lippo, "my lambs must be fed, and they have no small appetite. Double the five hundred ducats and I'll begin to think of it."

For the moment Faldora made no reply. That he must crush grapes before he could drink wine he knew, but the wine would have to be shared and so the fewer he crushed the more he would have left for himself. Such a sum as Lippo demanded would sorely cripple Faldora. Then he remembered the accident which would happen: so paid, the quittance would be as easy for a thousand ducats as for five hundred, and at the comforting thought the frown lifted.

"Be it so; I was never one to haggle with a friend,"

he said with geniality. "And, Lippo, let all go well and I will add something over and above: we must part in peace, we two. Is all agreed?"

"Not so fast, signor, not so fast. Risks are my trade and I count them as nothing; but there's one risk we dare not face and that is failure. Let us fail and what happens? I hang and you are damned! We shall need more men, and within a week I'll lay my hand on them. Now, what following have you in the Casa itself?"

"Ten or a dozen out of Tribalda's thirty-four."

"Ten certain?"

"Certain."

But though Faldora's reply was positive Lippo shook his head. "No offence, signor," he said civilly, "but you have tattered your own affairs to such rags that I doubt your patching now. How can you be certain?"

"There are four I could hang——"

"That goes for nothing. Let them throw you over and they are safe. Ascanio Faldora would never hang men who risked life for him."

"Seven I have bought and not paid for—yet."

"Bought how?"

"Promises. They know me."

Again Lippo shook his head doubtfully. Would he trust Carlo Faldora's promises? Not for five minutes! But he knew his man better than these seven did, and so—

"Perhaps that will hold—yes, perhaps, and the rest?"

"Three owe Tribalda a grudge, and at least six——"

"But that reckons twenty?"

"And so, to be on the safe side I say ten or a dozen," and Lippo nodded thoughtfully.

As they sat silent, each speculating how best to use the other, climbing across his back to some advantage, the quiet was broken by the yapping of dogs and a yelping snarl as a tooth nipped home in savage play.

"Giro!" said Lippo. "Let us have Giro in. He knows Tribalda's men better even than you."

"Then let him leave his accursed mongrels outside. The brutes will do a man a damage some day."

"Not unless Giro bids them," answered Lippo as he rose. "They know as well as he that here in camp their first bite would be their last." Opening the door he whistled, and presently Giro appeared, his five dogs trailing at his heels.

Mongrels they were, but being mongrels through whose veins ran the wild blood of fighting ancestors they had none of a mongrel's cowardice; only in size were they degenerate from their wolfish sires of bygone generations. And in size and bulk they varied. As Giro stood, some reached his knees, some fell short by six inches, but all were alike deep chested, deep mouthed, strong of limb, their rough coats shaggy and bristling, the heat slaver trickling from their jaws as they snapped at one another with bared fangs.

But savage though they were they had learned discretion. In all their restless shifting, never for an instant quiet, they showed their wisdom by never venturing so much as a paw across the threshold, though one, a hideous red-eyed beast of a dirty white, meeting the aversion of Faldora's eyes, snarled with such a sudden venom of rage that, half involuntarily, Lippo would have thrust the door shut had not Giro protested.

"No need, no need," he cried. "The signor's as safe as in a church. Not even Pluto there," and he pointed to a wicked-eyed black-haired beast, "not even Pluto would shake a rat until I give leave."

"And then?"

"Then," said Giro, "There would be no rat. Down on your bellies, all of you—down—down!" Then, as they

obeyed the imperative gesture of his open hand, he stepped inside the hut, closing the door behind him.

"Touching our little visit of ceremony to Faldora, hear what's planned," said Lippo. "There are ten ducats for every man, and fifty for you: Signor Carlo pays," nor, as he paused did Faldora protest. After all, the accident would leave the cost small. "The young signor claims ten or a dozen upon his side in the Casa; what do you say?"

"More," said Giro promptly. "But, signor," he went on, turning apologetically to Faldora, "they are more on their own side than on yours. It's not—not just love, you understand."

"So best! Who fights for himself has a sure paymaster," said Lippo, and laughed, well pleased. As, indeed he had the right to be. Who, at a pinch, his own skin at stake, would fight for love of Carlo Faldora? Never a soul in this world! But for his own pocket? Yes! fight, and fight like Giro's Pluto if need be! "So much for maggots in the kernel; now for cracking the nut. There is a small postern, Giro, is there not——"

"That will not serve," broke in Faldora. It had vexed his sense of his own importance that he should, as it were, have been elbowed aside while all that touched him most nearly was under discussion; here he could set them right, speaking with authority. "I know that postern: it is of four-inch oak, triple-banded and stronger than the great door itself."

"By your leave, signor, by your leave," said Lippo tolerantly. "I don't doubt it is all you claim, but we will first hear what Giro has to say. What of the postern?"

"Yes, it is all the signor says, but" and again Giro turned in deprecation to Faldora, "the hinges, signor, are nothing but wooden pegs——"

"The devil! What, you dog? You dared! You dared!"

"Softly, signor." It was Lippo who replied. "Would you have had Giro lose his time? Wise men look ahead, and you might not always have been the good comrade. The postern, Giro?"

"Just this—a push of the shoulder and it is off its hinges."

But Carlo Faldora was no longer listening. His pride was bitterly offended. In the complexity and contradiction of human nature he could dice away his honour, share with a Lippo the profits of petty theft, plot the murder of the man by whose side he broke bread, and yet resent a cunning deception which, in the outcome, was to turn to his own advantage. Grimly he decided that when Lippo went out of this uncertain world, to his own place by way of an accident, he should not go alone! Then his good comrade's voice, harsh with suspicion and challenge aroused him.

"You said Tribalda had thirty-four under him; Giro declares there are fifty?"

"Both are right. Tribalda's thirty-four are trained men, the rest are scullions, lackeys and their like. They count for nothing."

"I am not so sure of that! Then there are three from Forli?"

"Chisellers!" scoffed Faldora. "Though, by my faith, one carries a cudgel, does he not, Giro?"

"Better a cudgel than a dicebox," said Lippo. "Leave Giro to pay his own debts! A week will see quittance in full. Give me a week to add twenty to our thirty and I'll risk it."

CHAPTER XXI

LUCIA LEARNS THE HIGHEST LAW

EVENTS are often like the breaking up of a dyke, or the slipping of a stone down a mountain side. At first there is but a sweating on the outer surface of the bank, then a drip through a hidden crack, a seeping out of moisture by way of a hair-line so fine that the eye misses the portent, next a trickle, a thin spouting under pressure, a swift broadening of the stream and with a roar the flood is frothing through the breach.

Or, little by little, the soft earth cut from under it by the rains, the stone slips, gathering force with every yard until, toppling over some petty decline its impetus is loosed from all restraint and in mighty leaps it thunders to the valley, drawing a spreading trail of destruction after it. So it was through this last week, though, differing from the flood and avalanche, the cumulative and accumulating forces passed unnoticed.

First, an urgent express came from Arzano summoning Fieravanti to a conference with the Duke upon some difficulty which had arisen in the execution of the plans for the city's defence. Nor was he loth to go. Faldora held little pleasure for any man these days, and less than little for him, except in the putting life into the clay. Everywhere there was the sense of storm, either of tempest past, but with the ruin left in its track not yet scarred over, or of a brooding thunderbolt slowly gathering force. If old Ascanio was still the courteous host it was with a difference. His lean, eagle face was leaner and fiercer,

spells of silence possessed him and often, now, he drank the strong wine of Brettinoro beyond his wont; not to excess, be it understood, save in so far as excess spelled an exaggeration of the man's instincts. For one thing, never had the Faldora pride been so strongly in evidence as since the day Carlo Faldora had humbled it.

Of Madonna Lucia Fieravanti saw less and less. Now that the actual modelling was completed, and she no longer a necessity for the progress of the statue, she avoided the workroom with a directness which openly avowed her indifference to statue and sculptor alike. Best so, Fieravanti told himself, and in the same breath watched the door in an eager hope that the worst might befall!

But, to the great indignation of 'Tonio and 'Sandro, she never crossed the threshold—unless she found the door open and the room empty! Then, being a woman and certain she was unseen, she would slip inside, colour warming cheeks which had grown whiter than ever before in the heat of summer. It was strange, but it was not the statue which drew her. No, but with lingering fingertips she would touch this or that which he had touched, then set them sharply down, these innocent graving tools, as if suddenly they had scorched her, and, being still a woman, return, stiffly erect to the silence of her own apartments, there to tatter her weakness with talons of scornful self contempt but, being always a woman, never failing to meet the maker of saints with such a level of indifference that an open rupture would have been more tolerable.

No, Fieravanti had no regrets at obeying the summons to Arzano. But, however sore at heart, he abated neither thought nor caution on her behalf. Why should he? All love is proved by sacrifice and what greater sacrifice than self can there be? So Tribalda was warned afresh and 'Tonio and 'Sandro bidden watch with ceaseless vigilance lest Lippo swoop unawares.

"He is a clever rogue, is Lippo. He has his spies in the village and will hear I have taken the Arzano road. Why? To ask help from the Duke? He may think so and the fear spur him on to strike at once! Go amongst the folk, you two; learn all you can from their gossip but, on your lives, tell them nothing!" a double injunction which in time bore fruit.

Fieravanti being gone, next, in the gathering forces of the week's happenings, there came a guest to Faldora by way of the Custom.

"Above the salt, Madonna," said Joana, the maid who brought Lucia the information. "I heard no name, but he is no great lord like Count Fausto."

"Old or young?"

"Oh, very old, Madonna, old and bent, and with the sorrowfullest face in all the world." Then, being young and having lived all her life in Brettinoro or the Casa, and therefore privileged, she went on, "I shivered to see him. His eyes seemed the only thing alive in a face that's as grey as death, and they are sorrowfullest of all."

Nor, pausing a moment unnoticed as she crossed the threshold of the receiving-room, could Lucia Faldora dispute the truth of the description except in one particular. Bent? Yes, but as he faced her from midway across the room, where he stood by the side of his host, it seemed to the girl that it was weight of the years' sorrow and not their number which had stooped the narrow shoulders. Stooped they were; Ascanio Faldora, a generation older, topped him as a lance tops a strung-bow.

For the rest, Joana was justified, though the long and colourless face, furrowed by brooding care and lean with ascetic thought, was splendidly redeemed from unhappiness and discontent by the luminous, full eyes. They held her fascinated, these eyes, so virile were they and yet so sorrowful. It seemed as if out of them looked the gentle

spirit of a poet dreamer, surprised to find itself flung naked into a harsh world of tragedy. Yet, looking closer, there were signs that the spirit was not always gentle, not always the pledged ascetic, the mild and contemplative dreamer. The thin, acquiline nose had more than a hint of old Faldora's fierce pride, nor could the thick, crisp beard, once black, now heavily streaked with grey, hide the stern determination of the firm chin. For the rest, the skin was that of an Italian of the plains, swarthy rather than sallow, and from the full-lipped mouth the lower lip hung prominent. A dreamer? Perhaps; but once aroused he would be an ill man to move from his matured opinions.

As Lucia moved forward Faldora turned, a courteous hand on his guest's shoulder.

"We are in debt to the Custom, my girl. I present to you Messer Dante Alighieri. This is the last of my race, signor; we have rotted to one solitary distaff branch, we Faldoreschi."

"Surely budded, rather." He smiled as he spoke the three words and on the instant the sad austerity of the ascetic face dissolved into a gentle softness infinitely kindly, infinitely winning. "It is the heritage of age, signorina, to live in two lives—its memories and the youth of those it loves."

"Memories? God send us something less bitter!" said Faldora with grim bluntness. "We know something of your story and by report you would rather be bound for Florence than Ravenna if you were sure of a welcome! How long is it since they shut the gates on you? A dozen years?"

"Fifteen."

"Yet you talk of happy memory! Bleak as my own memories are, by Holy Paul, I would not change them with those of an outcast——"

"No, Count Ascanio! An exile for the right! No man is ever outcast who carries a clear conscience."

"The right? There Florence differs; and, to be honest with you, I think with Florence! But here comes Giuseppe and supper. By your leave, Messer Dante, we will talk no more of Florence. You are Guelf and hold by the Pope, I am Ghibelline and have been robbed by the Pope; but for to-night we are host and guest and may leave policies and politics to their father, the devil. Lead the way, Giuseppe."

Nor, with the guest of The Custom seated in Fieravanti's vacant place did talk halt for the leaving aside of these two sons of their sire. Both being men of the great world, there was ample common ground upon which their antagonisms did not clash. There they met, the one bringing to their talk vivid and clear-cut recollections of the great days of more than sixty years earlier when Empire and Papacy strove in death grips for supremacy, to the dire hurt of both; while the other, through his fifteen years of eating bitter bread and weary climbing of alien stairs, had gained much sorrowful knowledge of men and the ways of men.

Across their interchange, like shadows on a dim-lit stage, flitted at times the sinister figure of an Innocent, at times the greatness of an emperor hailed even by his foes as *Stupor Mundi,* or it might be the holy influence of the gentle, saintly Coelestine. Next the talk would turn upon Charles of Anjou, the bloody ghosts of the Sicilian Vespers haunting his steps, or Can Grande, the great Scaliger, to whom the poet owed a refuge in his direst need, these and a score more, with vivid careless hints of battles lost and won, of cities sacked and sieges raised, of embassies to Rome, the gay splendour of Courts which had filled their little day and were no longer. Ascanio Faldora

had lived through fifteen Papacies; Tuscany, Romagna, Umbria, The Marches, there was not a great city in their length and breadth which the exile, poet, philosopher and stateman, did not know. No! Opposites though they were and trenched in separate camps they had much in common, these two, and as they talked all other talk died.

Now, it is just in such intimate talk that men reveal themselves. Under the stimulus the bent figure opposite Lucia Faldora straightened in its chair, the austere, sorrowful face glowing at times and at times glooming, the full, clear eyes now mild in vision, now flashing as scorching an indignation as ever flamed from old Faldora's bitterest scorn. All the many sides of his multiple nature broke bounds in turn, but through the swift, bewildering shifts of mood the fascinated girl saw only the man who, rumour whispered, had walked through hell, had burst the bars of purgatory and looked with living eyes upon the glories of heaven's highest paradise.

Rumours they were, or little more than rumours, tales which, no doubt, had grown in the telling as tales will. But at times Marco Fieravanti had quoted lines which refused to be forgotten, and through the tales were blent uncertain echoes of a stupendous drama across whose stage there passed the living and the dead, tormented souls and spirits of divinest happiness, devils, saints, angels, with, far off exalted, remote yet near, the greatest glory of imagination, Eternal God Himself, effulgent beyond all understanding.

"Yesterday Gubbio, to-morrow Ravenna," he was saying, "I am a vessel without sail or rudder, driven here and there by every dry wind that springs from dolorous poverty."

"But surely," answering the bitter spirit rather than the bitter words, Father Bernardo broke his silence impulsively, "surely after fifteen years Florence, upon your

petition, would receive—give back—would—would——" His voice trailed into dumbness as the Florentine turned slowly and looked him in the face.

"Florence? When did Florence, being wrong, show amnesty to those who had offended, being right? Never! And now least of all! Some hearts, blessed by prosperity, expand their overflow in gentleness—never Florence! Envious, malignant, stony-hearted: to love liberty is in Florence the one sin unforgivable. Petition Florence? For what? That I may graciously be granted pardon for my innocence? absolution for a sin never committed? that being guiltless guilt may be forgiven and my clean soul excused its infamy? You speak as a priest, not as a man! No! Never by that road shall I return to Florence. If only by the gate of an infamous confession can Florence be re-entered, then, God's my witness, never again shall I tread the stones of the dear city."

"The dear city which you love," said Lucia, as the sonorous voice slipped from its pregnant scorn to gentleness.

"God, He knows—yes, Madonna. In spite of all—yes! And so loving Florence I ask no more but that she open her doors to me. What more is needful? I have suffered bitter wrong? Yes, but love that cannot pardon is no true love: it loves its pride better than the beloved. Love that sets self aside, finding its divinest good in sacrifice, is God in the flesh. The world holds nothing greater; it is the keystone of the arch of life, it pardons all offence, it sets the lowly by the highest and draws all men into the divine equality of heaven——"

"Aye, aye, aye," said Faldora impatiently. "That is true in heaven, maybe, but, Messer Dante, we who are on earth must live after our kind; and I say to you and to all, there are some offences never to be forgiven."

"Then was there never love," answered Dante, and

Faldora shrugged indifferently. It is to be doubted if all his long life he had known the heights and depths of love: certainly there had been no love for Carlo Faldora.

"May be, may be; but to me it seems you talk of what you do not understand. A grace, Father, since supper's ended," and with that all rose.

It was the unwritten law of The Custom that an over-night's guest should depart after breaking fast on the morrow. The reasons were twofold and plain to understand—none might trade upon his welcome, and there might be need to make way for some other chance wayfarer: not all who hung their rings on Brettinoro's marble pillar had the space of Faldora at their disposal.

But the needs must of nature is a greater power than any custom, and with the morning it was clear that the over-night's guest must rest a day lest he fail by the road. Nor was there for one instant any thought of demur, but, as Count Ascanio was busied easing his sore heart with much active doing of very little, the entertaining through this further day fell to Madonna Lucia.

"See to him, my girl," Faldora said as he made ready to mount. "No doubt he was a man once, but now he is more a woman than a man and so falls to your share."

"And you? You will take care that Lippo——"

But he cut her troubled anxiety short with a laugh new to Ascanio Faldora, so bitter-toned was it.

"Lippo? Signor Roverella, you mean! Yes, Tribalda has ten of a guard waiting for me beyond the gate. My God! to think of it! I must go abroad hedged, lest my own flesh and blood stab me in the back—as he has! as he has!"

"But, grandfather, if you would deal with Lippo as—as—Captain Tribalda advises——"

"When he touches Faldora, yes. Till then let the

Church that has robbed me of my people see to my people!" Seated in the saddle he paused, looking down at her from under puckered brows. "We must marry you and soon. For safety's sake it is that or a convent. But to whom—that's the question? Thank heaven! it will not be Signor Roverella! You and I are in Fieravanti's debt there. But now, to whom? Perhaps Alidosi will return this way; we'll see!" and with a nod, stern and hard of face, he rode out to where the ten waited to guard his back lest Carlo Faldora should stab the flesh as he had stabbed soul and spirit.

Alidosi? Or if not Alidosi, some other? And it must be soon? The hateful thought seemed to grip her heart and shake it as in a shut fist, driving the blood to the brain in hot waves. Alidosi or another? That would be intolerable—a sacrilege. Though she had had no love for Carlo Faldora yet to marry him had seemed no hardship—until three months ago: he had even been repugnant to her, yet to marry, and marry the heir to the name, thus linking name and heritage, had been so much a duty and a matter of course that not even repugnance had made wifehood a hardship—until three months ago.

Not even when repugnance grew into loathing, rousing a rebellion of spirit and flesh no less fierce for being suppressed, had she had any thought of pleading for her freedom. Of what use? The duty and the matter of course remained the same. Nothing was changed but herself, and in Ascanio Faldora's eyes she counted for nothing at all, or only as the mother of Faldoras yet to be. And what could she have pled? Not repugnance, not loathing: what did these matter in one whose sole use was to mother Faldoras? Nothing at all: they would have been brushed aside as immaterial.

What then? Could she plead that she loved—No! and again no! Loved whom? Marco Fieravanti the half

peasant! Marco Fieravanti who had said, "What is Lucia Faldora to me!" Better Carlo Faldora and her cup of loathing to the brim than a confession which shamed her pride and abased her womanhood. More than that. So to have pled would have been waste. The marriage would have been pressed on in haste and in the volcanic eruption of men's passions God alone knew what might have befallen Marco Fieravanti. Death almost certainly. To clear him finally from the path would be safest. No, she could have pled nothing.

Then had come Carlo Faldora's exposure, and with his outcasting had been cast out the fear of all she dared not form in clear thought, the fear bred of loathing. Nor did comfort end with that freedom. Unconsciously Fieravanti had revealed himself, and the love of the woman knew that the answering love of the man would have poured out its passion were it not held in as stern a check as her own. Why? Without a doubt her grandfather had given the reason by anticipation.

"Land, blood and the Church are equals. But riches? No! Any huckster may grow rich. Let the mud of the world stay where God placed it."

And if wealth great enough to seek marriage with Faldora remained the mud of the world in Count Ascanio's eyes, what would he not say to a simple peasant-born maker of saints, who called himself nothing more than a trader? Yes, there came the pinch-despisal, a pinch that nipped her own pride till it cried out in protest. Despisal of the man? No! never that, as God lived, she told herself, never that. From her soul she gloried in the man; not Carlo Faldora, not Alidosi, could compare with him.

What, then, did she despise? Truly, herself—and—yes, his birth, but with the despisal of custom rather than of any incisive conviction. All her life she had accepted the inferiority of the mud of the world as she accepted the

dogmas of the Church, giving no analytic thought to either: but as between the two, herself and his peasant blood, she despised herself most, mistaking a passive accustomed pride for the more active contempt: that the man in whom she gloried might have a spirit the equal of her own never crossed her thought.

But of late these cross currents had troubled her little: they had been turned aside as of no consequence once the shadow cast by Carlo Faldora had lifted. Life could drift on; life was not unhappy, it was even good! Not passionately good as she knew life might be if only Marco Fieravanti were—what? With Ascanio Faldora's, "We must marry you, my girl," ringing in her ears the question was folly. Marco Fieravanti could be nothing to her and Alidosi would pass that way within the month.

Busied with her tangled thoughts she passed through a side door, opening from the inner court where Faldora had mounted, into the garden; there, under the welcome shade, she found the exiled Florentine pacing slowly back and forth.

"You have had Marco Fieravanti with you?" he said, after the first morning courtesies had passed. "It grieves me deeply that we have not met."

"He will reckon it his loss," she answered sedately, giving no sign of the tremor which surged through her at the unexpected mention of the name. Then, eager for his praise, but slowly, lest she should reveal the eagerness, she went on, "You have seen his work—his carvings?"

"All Romagna knows and honours them! They are an inspiration and a promise. Truly God was good to men when he put His fire into a Marco Fieravanti. We have no other like him to preach the highest law as not even a priest can preach it. Madonna, with all my heart I say, God be thanked for Marco Fieravanti!"

"The highest law?" So shaken was she, so thrilled from

head to foot by the outspoken, generous enthusiasm, that to speak at all was difficult: the three words were no better than a stammer.

"Love, Madonna. And it is the highest law because if it be true to itself it compels us to the highest in us. And what is that highest? Let every soul answer to God, but it cannot be a denial of love which is born of God."

"Oh," she answered, still trembling, "surely there are loves and loves?"

Being deeply moved she spoke lightly. It may be that the sundial, seen beyond the opening of the trees under whose branches they walked, recalled a memory. Then the easy phrase had passed, now it was challenged.

"Loves and loves? No! one, one only, one and no more. We call it by different names but it differs in nothing except in that we differ in its using. Whether men live by it or die for it, it is the one love. Let it bring sorrow, let it be the daily God be thanked! of our happiness, it is the one love, and the gift of heaven. Winter and summer the sun is the same sun, and praised by God, love that is love is love unchangeable."

He paused in silence, his lips still moving, his eyes blind to earthly sun and shade as they looked, it may be, once again into "the Glory Infinite, the Light Eternal, the Love which moves the sun and other stars."

"But," she said, hesitating to break in upon the vision yet driven to speak, "are there not at times conditions——"

"Conditions?" He shook his head. "Neither condition nor conditions. How could there be? Love that does not love without conditions is not love. Either it puts self first or lacks faith. Love sees the best in the beloved. Suppose —I mean no offence, God knows, being old enough to be a father to such as you, Madonna—but suppose this maker of saints held you to be God's supreme creation, as love would, then he would see you to be compact of His great-

est work, and so seeing would reproduce the greatness for our duller eyes. Conditions? He would see beyond them. Conditions seek, love gives and glories in the giving!" Again he fell silent, but across the silence there broke a whisper, "Florence—what would I not give thee, Florence, my Florence." Then, with a long shivering breath he caught a lip in the grip of his teeth and was dumb.

"Even after fifteen years you love Florence?"

"Madonna, her very stones are dear. Love Florence? Yes! Though Florence is granite-hearted and will be to the end."

"But," she objected again, "if to love were to stoop——"

"Love uplifts, always; and uplifting is uplifted—even though it be upon a cross."

"I cannot understand, I cannot see, no, I cannot see."

"What of that? Love is like the sun at times and hides himself in his own brightness."

"But at least the brightness would be seen."

"Surely, else is it not love. But we are born blind and that is Marco Fieravanti's greatness—to open blind eyes, making clear that which we could not see apart from him. To-day, passing his workshop and the door open, I saw his latest and his greatest divination. Whence, Madonna, came the love of the Great Mother? Through the stooping of a yet greater love? Conditions? Heaven may stoop to earth, but we, poor petty fools of time, set our little greatness first and forget that to deny love is to deny God who is Love."

Again he fell silent, whispering to himself, and this time Lucia Faldora, sharing in part his vision, left the silence unbroken. That he spoke of Florence, Florence which made conditions to his love, while her thoughts were on Marco Fieravanti mattered nothing.

CHAPTER XXII

'TONIO PLAYS MICARE AND LOSES

WHAT next happened in that week's breaking of the dyke was that 'Tonio and 'Sandro played a little game of *micare* together. It is one of the oldest gambling hazards, as old as knuckle-bones, and one of the fairest when fairly played. Also it is one of the simplest—playing alternately, one gambler throws up his hands, extending what fingers and thumbs he pleases, the other guesses simultaneously, winning an agreed stake if right, losing nothing if wrong: or, it may be, that a total is fixed, the reaching of which ends the game.

But even when played with scrupulous fairness there is an advantage to the more experienced player, an intuition develops, an instinct comes with practice, and so 'Sandro was the first to reach the allotted score and thereby win choice of the two charges laid upon them by the Master.

"The signorina!" he said promptly. "Do you hunt news of Lippo in the village while I watch in the garden."

"You have all the duck," grumbled Hawk. "The signorina and shade, while I go roast in the sun. She may even speak to you," he added enviously.

"To-day to me, to-morrow to you," said 'Sandro, with the easy philosophy of the man who has no quarrel with life and sees no reason why the morrow should not be his also. "If I were you, 'Tonio, I would try the wine-shop and the fields; there's where you will find the men. The women, poor souls, will be afraid of an open mouth."

"It was a woman who spoke out that day at Margotti's."

"Yes, but that was to the Master; they all trust the Master. Try the fields, 'Tonio, try the fields."

"The fields? Plague take your fields! Once beyond the vineyards, where there is no work this time of year, the fields are no more than patches hidden here and there among rocks: but if the wine-shop fails I see nothing better."

And, apparently the wine-shop failed, else that man in the making, little Piero of the gold-piece, would not have come beating his knuckles on the postern whose hinges were held in place by wooden pegs.

"Captain Tribalda! for the Lord's sake, Captain Tribalda!" he panted, then fell to tearing his lean chest with hooked finger-tips as if either his lungs were bursting or that the thumping of his heart choked him, both being the truth. Never before had he run so fast.

"Captain Tribalda? Now what do you want with Captain Tribalda?" The well-fed scullion who opened the door was leisurely. Also it is always a pleasant thing to exercise a little superiority.

"That is for himself alone."

"Then he must wait, and you, too! Captain Tribalda rode out an hour ago," and the door would have been shut in Piero's face if he had not thrust a lean arm, naked to the elbow, between edge and jamb: the four inches of oak would have snapped it like a rotten stick.

"Then the Madonna—the signorina. For the Lord's sake, Signor Luca, let me speak with the signorina," and Piero, his breath coming back but his heart still choking him, fell whimpering.

Already the scullion had raised a hand to strike down the lean arm whose small bones looked so inquisitively out o' doors at his own fat, but two things stayed the blow. That the Madonna was good to the poor was known, also

that she could express her displeasure with clarity and strength; then it is pleasant to be called signor even when one is no signor at all, but just a plain washer of dishes; so Luca held his hand and questioned instead.

"First Tribalda, now the Madonna! What does a rat in a bundle of rags want with Tribalda and the Madonna?"

"That is not your business." In his desperation Piero plucked up assertive courage, not much but sufficient. Luca, remembering the clarity and vigour gave way.

"Into the garden with you: maybe you will find her there. Only if trouble comes of it your skin will pay!" and by way of earnest-money Luca aimed a cuff at the lad's ear as he passed. But there Piero was in his element: ever since he had found feet strong enough to take him tottering along a Brettinoro street he had learned the penalty of weakness in a rough world. With a swift duck of the head he evaded the blow, even finding time for a "Grazie, Luca," before his bare feet carried him gardenwards at top speed.

He found her at the sundial, alone, the latest guest of The Custom having passed on his road to Ravenna, but leaving behind him the effects of that unconscious influence which is surely one of the millstones of God, grinding slowly to the shaping of lives not our own. Half wrapped in his dreams, part in the material world and part in a world of his imagining, within five minutes the Florentine had forgotten his words, but she remembered.

"Love draws all to the divine equality of heaven;" "Love uplifts and uplifting is uplifted;" "To set our little greatness first and deny love is to deny God—love is the highest law." "Love gives and glories in the giving." No, never again could she be as she had been before his coming.

And yet, what were they, these two? Ships that pass in the night? Again, no! That is a mistake; such a

passing in darkness is writ in water. The truth, rather, is that from all points come touches on the wet and plastic clay, leaving behind indelible impressions which may shape a beauty or push deformity into stronger relief. So it had been with Lucia Faldora.

Hearing the quick pad, pad, of naked feet on the hard path she turned, one hand still resting on the gnomon of the dial. Naturally her fears flew to the household in the back lane where poor food, and too little of it, opened a ready door to heat fevers.

"What is wrong, Piero? Marietta? Has she——"

"No, Madonna, no; worse than that—Lippo has caught the Englishman."

"Lippo? The Englishman? Marco's *scarpellino?* When—How?" In her surprised bewilderment her heart spake out of its fulness; Marco was Marco in her thoughts.

"There in the fields; not Lippo himself but Giro of the dogs. And, Madonna, they say—they say——"

But what they said Piero could not tell because his heart was choking him. That stout little heart, so brave to face the world for the mother at home, fluttered into his throat at the very thought of Giro of the dogs. Going on one knee she beckoned him to come close, laid an arm about the patched shoulders and with the other hand pushed the damp tangle of hair back from the forehead. The Great Mother herself could hardly have been more understanding; almost at the first touch he calmed, gulping down his excitement.

"Tell me quietly. Where were you, and what happened to the Englishman"

"We were all in the field, Madonna, 'Rico the gobbo's field. I was working with the other men when the Englishman came and stood talking."

He paused for breath and the girl nodded comprehendingly. 'Rico the gobbo's field lay on the outskirts of Bret-

tinoro towards the twisted valleys between the upper hills, that is to say, in the direction of Lippo's camp. Living all her live in Faldora she knew its every inch of surrounding country and saw the humpback's field as clearly as if she stood upon the spur of rocks which overlooked its scantiness—a sun-steeped, triangular patch labouriously cleared of stones, and being enlarged little by little, as year after year a few yards were won back from the stony grip of nature. That, no doubt, was the work of the day and another custom of Brettinoro. Except to such as Piero no pay would pass, but the folk would work by turns on each other's fields and so each in turn reap a benefit. That, naturally, meant labouring at the edge of the cleansed ground, and 'Rico's field being an outpost in the struggle with nature, from that edge wild country swept hillwards.

"Yes?" she said, beginning to understand what had happened. "The Englishman came and talked?"

"Yes, Madonna, asking questions, and while he talked there was the noise of horses coming through the woods—shod horses, for their shoes clanked. 'Best go,' said 'Rico. 'Why so?' said 'Tonio—we call him 'Tonio Madonna, though he is a stranger. But 'Rico only shook his head and said that a man's legs were the gift of God. Perhaps 'Tonio did not understand what 'Rico meant, though we knew, for he kept on talking while we worked on until, the horses coming closer every minute, somebody, who I don't know for nobody lifted his head, but somebody said, 'It may be Lippo. Go, or stay for a fool,' and, Madonna, he stayed. 'Lippo?' said he, peering up into the wood where the noise came from, 'Lippo knows better than to touch Faldora!' 'Once that was so, but now maybe yes, maybe no,' said 'Rico, 'There's more Faldoras than one,' and we all went on working."

"Yes?" she said again, her white fingertips still busy in the dark hair—hair overfine for one of his birth and

nurturing; had it been coarser it would have been better for him. "Yes, what then?"

"Then, Madonna, no one said anything more but all worked on as if we had never heard the noise of horses, only I saw that 'Tonio had slipped his hand to the end of the great stick he always carried, and stood staring up into the trees. Then Giro came."

"Giro? That is the Giro who went messages for Signor Carlo? Giro who had his head bound up three months ago?"

"Yes, Madonna, where 'Tonio broke it with his stick. That is why they called him fool for not going while there was time. You see, we know Giro."

"But he stayed?"

"Yes, Madonna, and we worked until Giro came."

"What happened then? Quickly, Piero, quickly."

But instead of answering Piero fell to crying bitterly. At the postern, faced with refusal, he had whimpered in little catches of the breath like a troubled child, now, with all he had whimpered after granted, the lung-deep sobs so tore his throat that 'Sandro, lurking watchful out of sight, pushed his way hastily through the bushes, but, seeing the group, kept his distance.

"Piero, Piero!" cried Lucia affrighted by the outburst of childish passion, "what has happened? 'Tonio? Is 'Tonio dead?"

"No, Madonna—at least I think not, not yet. But, oh, Madonna, if Lippo hears what I have done he will burn the mother's house as he burned Margotti's—the mother, little Marietta, all of us, all of us."

"Never! Have no fear of that, Piero; no, have no fear. I promise you—I! When did I ever promise and fail? No, Piero, no, have no fear of Lippo, no fear at all. Tell me what happened when Giro came."

But as the boy—what was he but a child?—fought for

control, swallowing his sobs and then breaking out afresh as spirit or flesh got the upper hand—the Madonna had never broken a promise, all Brettinoro knew that; but this was the mother's life, all their lives, and Lippo was a cruel devil; all Brettinoro knew that too—her thoughts flew back to the edge of the wood where man and nature fought for mastery. It was easy enough to picture, the half score of bent backs, the faces to the earth that they might not see who came, or seem to know that any one came at all, and the one straight figure standing alert behind the line of cowards——

But at that she checked herself. Coward was easy said, but was their fear not reasonable? Margotti had spoken a warning, had died for speaking, and who had avenged Margotti? Could Brettinoro be blamed that it saved its own skin? Faldora of Pesaro, with his generations of pride behind him, had stirred no finger to avenge Margotti; who was she to cry coward on Brettinoro? Nor, with Piero Buti sobbing his pinched face white at her shoulder, was it hard to understand why the backs were bent. No! It is always easy for those who have never faced the terror of death to cry "coward"; Brettinoro had its women and babes to remember. Taking Piero's grimy hand in hers she patted it gently.

"Be easy, little son; no harm shall come to Marietta or any of them. Now tell me what happened when Giro came? See, that you may be quite content I promise to have them all safe in the Casa, or Captain Tribalda will send men to guard them. You were very brave to come: now tell me."

"Thank you, Madonna. And I was not brave at all, it was just that I did not stop to think; I only remembered the signor's gold piece and ran as soon as it was safe. Then just now I grew afraid—Margotti warned the signor and—and——"

"Have no fear, no fear at all. Tell me quickly."

"There were five of them, Giro of the dogs and four others. They came through the wood and as soon as they were clear in sight I heard Giro swear, then he called an order and two trotted to the right and two to the left while he came straight on, slower than the others, so that they were on each side of us when he reached where we were. Then he drew rein, took off his hat and laughed. 'My saint's day for sure, though I never knew I had a saint!' he said. 'Keep your distance,' said 'Tonio 'unless you want your head broken a second time.' But Giro only laughed again as he covered. 'Take your choice, my cudgeller; come peaceably or we'll make an end here and now,' he said. 'Clear the way, you others, clear the way.' and we drew into two bunches to let him through. No one said anything and, Madonna, with five of them, and, remembering Margotti, what was there to be said?"

"Nothing," she answered, a wail in her voice for the first time. "Never mind, what they said: what happened? Quickly, Piero, oh, quickly, quickly!"

"Madonna, I tell it the best way I can. Giro pushed through us and sat looking down on 'Tonio, a laugh in his eyes but the teeth showing; not a laugh as if he was merry, it made me more afraid than all his words. 'Five!' said 'Tonio, 'one more than on the Brettinoro road! Then there were two against you, now there is one: Stout hearts you have, you thieves.' I think Madonna, he was hoping to anger them and so some way steal a profit. But Giro only sat smiling. He had his sword drawn and the four also, and all were pointed in at 'Tonio. We just stood and looked on! 'Which is it?' said Giro, 'Peaceably living or peaceably dead? It is one way or the other, my cudgeller?' and 'Tonio leaped for him."

"Yes?" said the girl as Piero, telling his tale his own way, paused to gather his wits. She was trembling in

little shivers as if cold, and yet the sun was scorching hot on the parched grass. "Since they did not kill him is he sorely hurt?"

"No, Madonna, nor any one. He struck, but Giro was ready for him and bent sidewise so that the stick slid past his leg and rattled on the saddle, and before he was steady on his feet again the four at the sides had him hemmed. Even then we saw his shoulder heave as if to strike again and die, but he changed his mind. 'I fooled you once and broke your head in the fooling; what's been done before can be done again,' he said, and dropped the cudgel. 'It's you who are fooled,' said Giro, and, Madonna, there was no laugh in his eyes. 'Better have died now, for, by God! You'll pay!' They had him in their grip by that time, and when Giro rode back into the trees I ran here."

"And is that all?"

"All, Madonna, except that 'Rico said Giro was right. The Englishman was a fool not to have died quick and clean. You see, they remember Margotti in Brettinoro, and there is little to choose between Lippo and Giro of the dogs."

"Giro of the dogs? Why do they call him that?"

"Because, Madonna, when not on horseback he has five or six at his heels, or so they say; brutes fit to tear the throat out of a wolf." Which was an exaggeration and goes to show how truth grows to legend in the telling: not even Pluto, savage though he was, could have faced a wolf, brute to brute.

"Yes, I remember now: he even brought them to the Casa at times. Come!" But as she rose, her arm still across the lad's shoulders, she caught sight of 'Sandro and called him, nor was there any wasted time telling the news.

"Praise God! the Master is in Arzano!" was 'Sandro's

first comment, though, from the rage and fear in his face as he listened, the girl guessed something of the comradeship between these two who both loved the Master.

"Why?"

"Because, signorina, if need be, and let Count Ascanio say what he might," he answered bluntly, "He would face Lippo single-handed for 'Tonio's sake. Though it would not be single-handed, there would be at least two of us," he added.

The girl flushed as she listened. Not so many days before her pride would have flashed out in cold rebuke at the hinted censure, even though conscious that it was deserved, but not now. 'Sandro spoke out of love and love was the highest law.

"Come" she said again. "Let us find Tribalda."

But as they went, all silent, Piero's hand caught in hers with a comforting firmness, they met Faldora instead of the Captain of the Guard. Every day he seemed to Lucia to grow gaunter, leaner, more rigidly upright, but upright through visible effort. Yet there was no abatement in the vigilance of the fierce eyes burning deep in their over-hung sockets, for now he halted them.

"What now?" he said, pointing a long brown finger at Piero's tear-stained face. "Is it the fever again? We must see to our own, my girl."

"It is Lippo again," she retorted. "He has laid hands on 'Tonio, the Englishman."

He stared at her a moment blankly, then the eyes narrowed, the nostrils widened as teeth showed below a curled upper lip, and there broke over the lean old face a smile so terrible that the girl shivered as she had shivered in the sunlight.

"God be praised! By Holy Paul! at last Lippo has touched Faldora, Lippo and the Signor Roverella! Oh, yes, he had touched Faldora before, but this is for all the

world to see. Our private hurts we keep to ourselves. Tell me, boy, when and how?"

But Lucia, knowing the story and feeling the grimy hand held in hers wince at the thought of such an ordeal as examination at the Illustrissimo's hands, took the telling upon herself, shortening the tale yet missing out nothing which might count. And as he listened Faldora nodded from time to time, nodded curtly, sharply, as the acute eagerness of five and twenty might, or flung in a word or two by way of underscoring.

"Aye, Giro! The Chiseller was right: God knows how long Signor Roverella has flung friendly dice with the devil—and Brettinoro stood by? Um; yes, I do not blame them, they had Margotti to remember and their skin is their skin—'Rico was right: the Englishman had better have died where he stood. God rest him, for he had courage."

"But," said the girl, "Tribalda will surely be in time if he makes haste?"

"I will be no such fool: haste is own sister to failure."

"Then you may be too late, and the Englishman——"

"One more or less matters nothing; what matters is that when I strike I strike home. The boy has brought the best news I have heard in five years; give him a double crown piece and let him go."

"He is afraid of Lippo, and I have promised they shall be housed in the Casa or guarded at home."

At that, annoyance darkened Faldora's face. "Here at the Casa!" he repeated vexedly. "That is a pity. The bait would have drawn Lippo as it drew him to Margotti. But a promise is a promise, so it cannot be helped. Only not at the Casa. A guard will be best; not too many, just few enough to draw Lippo and we'll pen him from each end of the *vico* like a rat in a trap.

"But," she protested, "if harm touches them it is the honour of Faldora."

"Leave Faldora's honour to me!" he broke in sharply. "As to the Englishman, he must take his chance. Only," and he shook his head, "I would rather he had died in 'Rico's field; it would have been cleaner, yes, cleaner. But I will talk to Tribalda when he returns. By Paul! there'll be an end to—to—Lippo!" But though he spoke of Lippo, and Lippo only, it is to be doubted if Signor Roverella's name had not come first to his thoughts.

CHAPTER XXIII

HAWK'S FIGHTING CHANCE

HEMMED between two horsemen, with two more behind and one in front, his hands bound and the end of the cord twisted round Giro's wrist, Anthony Hawk put aside all thought of escape. He loved life neither more nor less than the average man, and would have faced death both boldly and cheerfully if the end might have come by way of battle and hot blood; but, having all a healthy man's will to live strong in him, he had caught at the alternative of present life which Giro had offered; not, be it said, for the sake of the few hours it brought, but because it always kept the door of hope on the latch. So far as he could see it would serve no good end if he were growing cold on his back in the humpback's field instead of tramping under the shade with the hot smell of the horses all about him: the one was a final end, the other—well, at the worst it was less final. As to Giro's threats, these did not trouble him. He might be as cruel a devil as his master, but they would scarcely torture him in cold blood for an honest blow on the skull given three months before: which is as much as to say that he looked at Lippo and Giro through English eyes and, as we all do, saw something of himself in those with whom he rubbed shoulders.

Nor, for the moment at least, was Giro devilish, or even spiteful, in this his hour of triumph. There was no driving the horses at a trot that the prisoner might either burst his lungs in order to keep pace or be dragged at

a rope's end. Then, too, a gallop under the trees had great possibilities to an ingenious mind—a crossing of the rope behind a tree trunk at top speed and the panting flesh at the end would suffer violence: or the under-brush would trip the racing feet to the sport of those who were onlookers, or—oh yes, there were possibilities! Yet Giro seized upon none of them, and 'Tonio told himself that growing hot in the shade was better than growing cold in the sun in 'Rico's field. If he could have looked into Giro's thoughts he might have been less certain of the gain, but which of us knows all the thoughts of another? Not one! and so 'Tonio was content with his choice.

For a time no one spoke, nor was it Giro who at last broke the silence.

"When shall we blindfold him?" said the fellow who rode on 'Tonio's left.

"I have been thinking—but why blindfold him at all?" answered Giro. "We only blindfold those who might tell our secrets when they leave camp."

"And he?"

"Won't leave," Giro said laconically, but, after a pause, added thoughtfully. "As to the blindfolding, a thumb in the eyes would do as a beginning of—of—the rest that's to come. But then, he might wish to look at himself before all's over. No, we'll leave him as he is. Was it five or six new lads came into camp this morning?"

"You will do well to hold your tongue over that."

"Chut! chut!" chided Giro gently. "What harm, since he is going to stay with us? How many?"

"Six."

"And enough! The fewer the mouths the fuller the bellies! Here's a hint for you, all four—let young Carlo promise what he will, but when all's said a man is his own best paymaster. Loot, lads, loot: loot though young Carlo howl curses! It's not often the sacking of a Casa

Faldora will come your way. Which," and Giro gave the halter-end a jerk by way of emphasis, "is letting you into a secret! But by the looks of your wrists you are no blabber, nor likely to be," and again the rope was jerked, not brutally but that the grim humour might be fully savoured.

"Better be safe and blindfold him," urged the fellow who had spoken before.

Perhaps a glimpse of one of the band on outpost duty moved him. But Giro was obstinate.

"No need: he will be as safe as Ricci."

"Ricci? but Ricci is dead?"

"Just so. Ricci and Margotti can hold their tongues with any man, and so will our cudgeller."

"Margotti? Lippo was too rough with Margotti, or at least too rough with the children. I had a *bambino* of my own once."

"He'll be proud of his father! Where is he now?" asked Giro curiously.

"Dead. It was there in Florence. I killed a White and ran for it, leaving the boy, and—and he died. The Whites would not feed him and the Blacks dared not—God curse them all for brutes and cowards."

"And what better were you at Margotti's?" said 'Tonio, "Brutes and cowards all of you!"

"So you have a tongue? Use it while you may! Hulloa!" and raising his voice Giro called to the sentry. "Is Lippo in camp?"

"He was an hour ago. Who have you there?"

"You will see presently! Faith of Giro, he'll show you sport before all's over," and with that they rode on.

Because of the shelter of the surrounding trees it had been impossible for Anthony Hawk to guess his whereabouts, but always his feet had been conscious of an up-

ward lifting of the rough ground under them. Now the steepness sharpened, and passing between two wooded spurs, whose abrupt slopes guarded a narrow flat, they came suddenly upon the camp with its wooden huts and leisured movement of easy life. For, looking about him with something deeper than curiosity, it was the orderly disorder, the assured tranquillity, which struck 'Tonio: orderly in that there was no quarrelling, disordered in so far that every man seemed to follow his whim of the moment, and so tranquil that beyond a laugh, the lilt of a song or whistle, no sound broke the level hum of life where men's voices, and the stamping of horsehoofs under the surrounding shade, blent into an indistinguishable murmur. Not old Ascanio Faldora, with Tribalda under him to enforce orders, could have imposed a wiser discipline.

The truth was Lippo understood his lambs and their need for careful shepherding, lest the wolf in their sheep's clothing break bounds. Their freedom was their own, but the liberty must be liberty without licence. All knew that any disturbance of the peace would be stamped out pitilessly lest the quarrel should spread, and the interests of all suffer. It will be seen, therefore, that in this highway cut-purse there were so clearly the makings of a great condottiere that Lippo's faith was justified: let him sack Faldora, fighting for Faldora, and a dozen greater than Faldora would hire his sword at his own price.

Because of the crowning venture in the near future all petty hunting for coppers upon the road had been abandoned and Giro's return with 'Tonio in leash stirred the interest of a full camp. Round they gathered as pigeons gather round a handful of flung corn, a wild and diverse crew, men from the south, swarthy, almost, as Moors, men from the north with their tattered sheepskins still upon their shoulders, men of the cities with the city's stamp of

vice in their cunning faces, men of the fields, stupid as their own sheep and hardy as their own goats. Nor was that the sole diversity. Some were young as innocence, others old as sin, but with their fresh youth a lie and their age not so broken but that the devil had a sturdy use for them yet.

To all the feud between Lippo's jackal and the Englishman was well known. Many were the questions shouted, but Giro put their clamourings all aside, nor when idleness began to make rough sport of his prisoner would he permit the violence.

"Let him be, all of you. He is Lippo's first, then mine, though mine already by Lippo's promise. And you'll lose nothing by waiting. D'you think I have nursed him all the way from 'Rico's field for pure love! Where's Lippo? In his quarters? Then clear a road," and with a touch of the spur he drove his horse forward.

But once clear of the throng he slipped from the saddle, threw the reins to a comrade and went forward on foot, 'Tonio keeping step a yard or two behind. Already Hawk was in doubt—would it be better if he were growing cold in the heat of 'Rico's field? It would at least be an end, whereas, if Giro's threats meant anything, threats the more sinister for their very vagueness, there was worse in store. But that ineradicable tenacity of life which is certainly God-given, and therefore has nothing of cowardice in it, drove out the doubt, stiffening his nerve as he set his shoulders more squarely. Besides, in 'Rico's field the best he could have hoped for was such a hampered blow with his cudgel that it could have done little hurt, whereas now it would surely go hard with him if, hook or crook, he did not take grim toll before the end came. Sooner or later they must loose his hands. The thought added yet another inch to the straightness of his backbone when,

presently, he faced the condottiere in the making, faced him, not with a swagger, hardly even defiantly, but rather, after the manner of his race, like a man unafraid and sure of himself.

Lippo was not alone. For the past half hour he had been concerting final measures with Carlo Faldora: that is to say, he detailed just as much of his plans as pleased him, listened to young Faldora's comments or suggestions, and, while assenting to the latter, held his intentions unchanged. At the darkening of the open doorway both looked up.

"Signors," said Giro, triumph in his voice as, the latent cruelty in him flashing to the surface, he drew 'Tonio to the front with a savage jerk of the rope, "I claim a promise: by all the laws he's mine."

"The chiseller!" said Faldora, while in the same breath Lippo cried, "By all the gods! it's the cudgeller! Giro, you have wrought better than you knew! Now, Signor Carlo, we'll sift the truth and make all clear. Where and how did you trap him?"

"In 'Rico's field. How? Oh, easily, easily," answered Giro airily as he twitched the rope. His eyes were blazing.

"Five swords to a stick," said Hawk. "Yes, it was easy."

"Signors, both," said Giro earnestly, "you gave him to me: months ago you gave him to me, you know you did."

"Be easy; you shall have him. But first there is a thing or two we must know. Shall I question him, Signor Carlo? Good! Listen now, Hawk—oh, yes, we know your name—why has Fieravanti gone to Arzano? Answer if you don't want the rope on your wrists to slip up to your neck."

"I'll answer nothing while I am bound," said 'Tonio

"Why not?"

"Because I will not. Is that not reason enough?"

"Jerk the rope, Giro. There, if that were at your neck——"

"Then you would hear nothing, for I could not answer at all."

"That is good—for a chiseller!" said Faldora, and laughed. "Lippo, he has the best of us. There is stuff in the fellow. In his place I would say the same." Which was true. Through the silence which followed Giro's dogs could be heard yapping and snarling, but being trained by hard discipline they kept away from their master until called.

"Three swords and one man with bare hands," said 'Tonio. "The odds are greater than five against a cudgel down in 'Rico's field. Trussed like a calf I'll answer nothing." What he would gain by unbound hands was not very clear, but he wanted time for thought. Then there was always this—with freed hands he could at the worst die fighting, though as yet he had no mind to die.

"Have it so," and, Giro's sword-point six inches behind his shoulder blades, Hawk found himself free. "Now, speak. Why has Fieravanti gone to Arzano? Oh, you need not lie. We know he has gone and we know Tribalda wants more men: we know, too, that Fieravanti has a claim on the Duke. Has he gone to beat up recruits?"

"And if I should tell you——" began 'Tonio slowly. He was in doubt how to reply, whether to assert ignorance, lie or tell the truth: which would best serve Faldora whose bread and salt he ate? From Giro he knew an attack was planned, would the truth hasten the assault prematurely? would a lie gain time for Tribalda to hunt men? But the answer to the first was that, according to Giro, Lippo had men enough, and to the second that old Faldora was obstinate, refusing utterly to recruit the garrison. That left

his doubt where it was, and so, hesitating, he drawled and stammered until Lippo lost patience.

"If? If? If? Who are you to cry ifs to us? Answer, or by all——"

But Carlo Faldora cut the oath short. "The man is right. If there is no hope for him why need he speak at all. I would not."

"No hope; he's Giro's! But there are deaths and deaths."

"That is not enough; give him a hope. Listen, Hawk. As between us two there is no love lost——"

"No," said Hawk, "You rode over us outside Forli, rode over us as if we were dogs."

"You should have kept to the ditch! But that is past: answer now and, faith of Faldora, you shall have a fighting chance for your life."

"Signor, signor, he's mine," protested Giro. "By all the laws he's mine."

"We all know the faith of Faldora," said Lippo, with a grim irony which only Faldora fully understood. "You hear, Hawk? Answer and you shall have your chance. Is Fieravanti in Arzano seeking men?"

Short as the altercation had been it gave 'Tonio time to set his thoughts in order. To assert ignorance would not pass, to lie would hasten the assault that the coming of reinforcements might be forestalled: neither of these would serve, only the truth remained, nor, in any case, could he see any hurt from the truth. There was the chance that Lippo's plans were not yet ripe, and with nothing to force action there could be the longer time for Tribalda to convince Count Ascanio's obstainacy: that it no longer needed convincing 'Tonio could not be aware, but the truth seemed wisest.

"No. The Duke sent for him and there is no question of men from Arzano."

Lippo, leaning across the table, his eyes fixed on the Englishman's, sat back with a long breath. Here was news worth paying for and a rankling doubt set at rest. "I believe him. It rings true. What do you say, Signor Carlo?"

Faldora nodded. "I agree," he said curtly. Beyond Hawk's shoulder Giro, troubled and malignant, peered in watchfulness at them both. Through the silence the growling and the howling of the dogs sounded dismally.

"No question of men?" repeated Lippo and laughed exultantly. "D'you see what that means? All's as usual! There's no alert! Signor Carlo, Faldora is as good as yours. What guard is there at night, Englishman?"

"What always has been," answered Hawk, and Lippo smote the table with his fist.

"Nothing changed?"

"Nothing."

"In their sleep! By God! We'll have them in their sleep by way of Giro's wooden hinges! They fear nothing? eh, nothing?"

"I'll not say that since—no offence, signor," 'Tonio broke off suddenly as he turned to Faldora. "When my master heard that you—that is when news came—Yes, he was doubtful and so was Tribalda. But Count Ascanio would believe nothing: that is the truth."

"You hear, signor?" Lippo showed his teeth in an ironic smile. "Truly a good reputation is gold in the pocket and we shall have the spending, you and I. So that is the truth? I believe you. It agrees with what we heard of Tribalda. Well, Faldora's faith is pledged, and the truth is worth a fighting chance for life—a fighting chance," he repeated with significant emphasis.

From beyond 'Tonio's shoulder Giro thrust forward a lowering face.

"Signor, there was a promise—he's mine."

"So he shall be. That is my one virtue—I always keep my word. How else could my lambs trust me? But we must remember the honour of Faldora! How to square the two is the question. A fighting chance? Let me think —yes! by the blood of Bacchus I have it! You shall have him, Giro—your sword to his cudgel?"

"I ask no better." Round swung Hawk on his heels, looking across his shoulder into Giro's now more than sullen face. This was better than the cold heat of 'Rico's field. But Giro already had his point drawn back to strike.

"That's no sport—for me! If that is your last word I'll end him, here and now. Stir, dog, and I thrust."

"Dog?" Faldora caught at the word. "There is better sport than steel and cudgel! Why, one lunge might end it. Besides, Giro has his uses until Faldora is mine. No; but here is sport, Lippo—Hawk against Giro's dogs: a fighting chance that!"

CHAPTER XXIV

—AND HOW HE USED IT

ONCE again there was silence and through the silence, as if to give point to Faldora's proposal there sounded the snap and snarl of the dogs, with Pluto's deeper bay, full-throated and menacing, loud above the rest. It was Giro who spoke, part denying, part protesting, almost whimpering.

"No, signors, not that. My dogs are myself."

"Why, that ends it," said Lippo, again leaning forward, but this time with his eyes on the scowling jackal. "Dare to strike him in the back and I'll—but I'll not threaten; you know me and understand well enough. The dogs? Signor Carlo, that is an inspiration; see how it makes all clear! The dogs are Giro, he says so himself. Well, then, there is my promise; what your dogs have you have! And Signor Carlo's pledge is kept also: Hawk shall have his fighting chance. Listen, Hawk; if you win through your life is yours and, by Paul! you'll have earned it! A fighting chance? Oh, yes, a fighting chance!" and he laughed. Surely in Beelzebub's great review of his lieutenants in "Paradise Lost" it is an omission that there is not one stroke of sardonic humour? A cruel devil is never so cruel as in the mockery of his laughter.

Faldora joined in the merriment, joined heartily, and with good reason. To kill two birds with one stone is proverbially a good day's work, here there were—how many? three at the least, perhaps four. For one, he struck Fieravanti. From the first he had disliked the maker of

saints, later he hated him and finally it was to him he owed that he was outcast from Faldora and driven into open league with a road-thief. For another, he struck the Englishman with whom he had always been on the edge of quarrel; for a third, he loathed Giro's dogs: that his two enemies should fly at each other's throats for his sport was surely a fourth bird worth knocking off its perch? Come to think of it, there was even a fifth in the assertion of his superior dignity: it was his proposal which had carried the day.

So, very well content with himself, Faldora laughed while the two just within the threshold held each other at gaze, both speculating whether or not to make an end there and then. But for his life's sake Giro dared not and, with the steel point quivering two feet away, Hawk, teeth and hands clenched, saw no fair chance of that toll his vexed soul yearned after. To go alone into the shadows would be almost more bitter than death itself. That the fighting chance was a vile mockery he guessed from Lippo's laughter; but it was still a chance. In a man of 'Tonio's hot blood and abundant virile strength there is always a splendid optimism—it is true he had no closer acquaintance with Giro's dogs than to know they were ill-tempered mongrels.

Again it was Giro who spoke first.

"Bare hands, signor."

"No!" cried Faldora, "a cudgel at least, eh, Lippo? a cudgel at least?"

"Um!" said Lippo and, smiling, looked Hawk up and down in thoughtful speculation as, thirteen hundred years before, a Director of the Circus might have appraised the fighting endurance of some human food for the maw of the arena. If the muscles of the arms matched those which filled so well the close-fitting trunks and hose the Englishman, bare-handed, should hold his own—for a

time. A cudgel would certainly help to even the odds, but it was not wise to push Giro too far. As Faldora said, he had his uses until the Casa had changed hands. So he shook his head. "No, I think not. Are you content, Hawk?"

"Content?" 'Tonio's passion burst in flood. "Cowards all of you—cowards all three! Lippo, Margotti said you were a cruel devil, but he was wrong: the devil is more of a man! And you, Signor Faldora? Are you of the same scum? Will you stand by and see a man flung bare-handed to the dogs—a man who ate bread at the same table as yourself——"

"No bread of my offering. All the same you are right. Lippo, he should have at least a cudgel."

"No! no! no!" cried Giro, drawing a step nearer but never lowering his point. "Bare hands—no cudgel: I took him, he's mine—mine."

"If you want sport, give me him instead," urged Hawk, with a backward jerk of his head. "Dogs? Dogs are no christian fight."

"Did Margotti say we were christians?" gibed Lippo. "My word stands, Giro. It is your fighting chance, Hawk: make the most of it for you'll get no better. And why should it not be sport? I see no reason! When shall it be! In an hour?"

"So that's your last word? Then here's mine—cowards! cowards all three! In an hour? No; now—now: give me a drink of wine and end it."

Lippo laughed. "You begin to feel the teeth, do you? You shall have your wine. And listen—promise you will play no tricks and I shall bid Giro stand from your back."

"No tricks?"

"Yes—that you will neither try to escape nor force a quarrel—oh, you are not such a fool but you understand."

"And if I say no?"

"The rope is beside you," answered Lippo laconically.

For a moment Hawk, his passion ebbed from him, stood silent. To agree robbed him of his hope of snatching some chance weapon and getting home at least one stroke before he died: but if he refused what became of that hope, bound as he would be, hand and foot? What, too, of his muscles, cramped by the cords and stiffened by the cramping? Giro would surely see to that!

"Better not trust him," advised Giro, who, his mind upon his dogs, had the same thought. Knots, cunningly tied, would rob this accursed Englishman of half his strength.

"I promise," said 'Tonio curtly, and, at a nod from Lippo Giro, grumbling under his breath, sheathed his sword. "If I win through, Lippo, I go free?"

"Give us the honour of a brief visit first," said Lippo. "After, let us say, three days, you can again eat bread at the same table as Signor Carlo—as his guest! Giro, a jug of wine and some bread and meat. That, Signor Hawk, is the difference between men and dogs: that they may fight the better we feed the one and starve the other. If you are wise you will bide here until all is ready."

The advice was good, nor was 'Tonio sorry to be left alone. The very fulness of the day, culminating in this last storm of passion, had forced a sapping of strength. Very grimly he was determined that however great a mockery this fighting chance might prove to be in the issue, he would use it to the utmost, not simply facing the odds as a man should face odds, but that coolly, warily, forcefully, he would pit wit and his every ounce of strength against Giro's howling brutes. Therefore he rested, chafing his limbs the while, and was ready with appetite for his meat and drink when presently it came.

It was one of the city-bred rogues who brought the food, a shifty-eyed lad who, it was soon clear, had no love for

Giro or Giro's dogs. Setting down the wine and the platter of bread and meat on the table, he made a great show of shifting them here and there, whispering under cover of the busy clatter.

"The dogs, is it? Damn the brutes, and their master, too! Here's your best chance: I've fought dogs for a crust and I know." Swiftly he glanced at the open door and as swiftly back. "Don't try choking. The fur is too thick for your clutch: besides, you have only two hands and the rest would be at your throat. No, smash the jaw, so!" with his clenched fist he struck savagely sideways, again glancing at the door. "Or, if you get the chance, a grip of the leg and a jerk—like this!" Now it was a sharp heave of the fist, a heave upward and with a twist. "At times the bone snaps: you understand?" and with a nod he went.

No, 'Tonio did not quite understand, but the goodwill warmed his heart as the goodwill of our fellows always must. And the whisper was timely: it turned his thoughts where it was wise they should be turned—to some plan of action, so far as plan was possible. Eating slowly he set himself in imagination with his back to the wall and Giro's snarling brutes stalking him: thus and thus would they come, then thus and thus must he meet them; and so two good things were gained—confidence grew, and the unknown, faced in anticipation, lost half its terrors. When Lippo called to him from the door he was ready.

Along one side of the camp were ranged the wooden huts used for stabling the horses through the winter: of these, some were enclosed, some mere sheds open at the front. To one of the latter Lippo led the way. It was a hollow square of some fifteen feet in breadth and depth; backed with rough planking, its sides were formed by the partitions which divided it from adjoining structures. The floor was of dry earth, hollowed at places by the

stamping of hoofs but offering a sufficiently sure foothold: of manger or hayrack there was no sign. From outer corner to outer corner, that is to say across the mouth of the shed, a straight line had been deeply scored in the worn grass, while from the same points a curve, ten feet deep at its widest, swept out into the camp, marking rudely off a space like a bent bow. Here Faldora waited.

Outside this curved line Lippo's lambs were ranged, three and four deep, some eagerly questioning, others as eagerly answering as they pointed to the hollow of the empty shed; there were exclamations, sharp cries, much laughter, and upon the faces of all an alert interest, pleasantly quickened by expectation. Without doubt their forefathers had worn just such an expression as they crowded the rising tiers of the circus, waiting the coming of the gladiators. As the lines divided to let them pass through 'Tonio heard wagering: the odds laid were on Giro's dogs. Beyond the curve of the bow the camp was a void, but from an adjoining shed there came at times a long-drawn whine, at times a yelp or a howl.

"There!" said Lippo curtly. Then as 'Tonio, his jaw hard set and looking neither to right nor left, passed on into the empty shed he turned to the crowded lines behind him, one hand lifted for silence. "Listen all of you. You know what's forward. Let no man cross that bent line. Giro will bide in this space here with Signor Carlo and me: he may speak to his dogs, but if he sets foot inside the shed there's an end—the Englishman wins. Hulloa! Giro! Come, all is ready."

A second time the packed lines parted and Giro passed through, his dogs at his heels: save for little complaining yelps of excitement they were silent. 'Tonio, a yard out from the back of the shed, that he might have free arm-room, drew a long breath and set his teeth the harder; he was breathing faster than common, but breathing

deeply, quietly. Unconsciously, but as if by agreement, Lippo and young Faldora drew to the points of the arc, leaving the centre free for Giro and his dogs.

A moment he stood among them, his eyes on Hawk, then suddenly he stooped, flung out both arms in a wide sweep and with a hissing cry urged them forward.

"To him, Azzo! to him, Fortuna!" he cried, and seizing the nearest flung it a yard into the shed. Hawk, his fists clenched, stooped forward, half crouching from the hips. Save for Giro's urging, now guttural now sibilant, there was a great silence.

And the brutes understood. Along their shaggy backs their rough coats stiffened, bristling. Drawing their hind legs under them they half flattened, crawling forward paw by paw with bared fangs and slaver frothing in the red of their jaws, their fierce unwinking eyes staring up greedily at Hawk's face: from time to time there was a throaty whimper, a complaining whine, a hungry impatient yelp, as if they strained against the leash of their own caution.

"To him, Cecco! to him, Speranza! Seize him, Pluto! seize him! seize him!" In his excitement Giro's voice hoarsened. He was on one knee now, his hands waving in little quick jerks towards the stooping Englishman. From behind there was no sound, scarcely a stir as they strained on one another's backs to see the better. Then came a deep *"Ah-h-h"* as Cecco leaped.

Whining, his fore paws outstretched, his muzzle lifted, he had gathered his hind legs under him, clawing at the hard earth for foothold: now, open mouthed and snarling, he flung himself upon his quarry while Giro, beating the air, shouted, "To him, Cecco! to him, Azzo! Pluto! Pluto!" But Pluto and the rest, growling now, kept their places, and Hawk, watchful, wary, cool-headed and remembering the advice of him who had fought dogs for crusts, struck a savage lateral blow with his clenched fist.

Well timed, delivered with all his power of arm, it caught the open lower jaw, stretched to snap, and with a yelp Cecco fell sidelong, rolled over twice and lay howling. From the crowded lines a roar went up; Giro's dogs were not loved.

Perhaps the roar goaded them. With an eager, choking bark Azzo and Speranza flew to the attack, the one leaping upward, the other racing in afoot. Distracted, Hawk's sidelong blow missed its mark, striking too high, though the downward drive of the other fist stopped Speranza's rush for the moment. But only for the moment, and in their second rush Pluto joined, baying loudly as he closed upon his enemy: behind, Fortuna lay flattened, *ventre-a-terre,* growling loudly as she inched forward.

A fighting chance? Hawk, his lungs half bursting as he fought for breath, now shouldering off a leap, now striking fiercely at jaw or ribs, now shifting sidelong from his hips to evade a snap, grit his teeth in despair. Chance? What chance? Bitter hearted, he understood the mockery of Lippo's laughter. Tooth and claw they were on him and well he knew that time fought on their side: without a doubt their brute strength would outlast his powers of endurance. Then from behind Fortuna leaped and again a roar went up, but this time the roar of the arena hot with lust of blood. They did not love Giro's dogs, but in the frenzy of their excitement it was thumbs down for the man.

Crouching lower that he might have the weight of his body behind the blow Hawk fought on, but not now with any set plan. Where ever he could strike in that welter of bristling fur he struck, conscious that the time was short, the end closing in. Breath came sobbing from his dry throat, came in quick aching gasps; the odds were over-great. Once Pluto's teeth in the stout cloth of his doublet almost pulled him down, once Speranza, scram-

bling upon her fellows' backs, missed the naked throat by a tooth's graze.

"To him! to him!" shouted Giro, now on his feet and flailing the air with his arms. "Tear him, Pluto! tear him, Azzo! tear him! tear him!"

From where he lay Cecco howled on, his jaw broken. Then in the confused battling as they worried for him, shifting here and there for an opening, Hawk gripped a leg and rising suddenly stepped back—it was Fortuna, the smallest of the pack. Up he heaved the howling brute, swinging her and warding off the rest as best he could with knee and bent arm, then struck with a thudding crash on an exposed flank and with the double howl which followed the end came. Shouting a curse Giro rushed across the boundary, tearing at his sword-hilt as he rushed. But that his dogs hindered him he would have thrust Hawk through before Lippo's hand on his collar jerked him back.

"A foul! a foul! Hawk wins!" he shouted. "The dogs! clear away the dogs! Make an end—make an end!"

Loosing the stunned brute from his grip 'Tonio staggered back; groping for the shed wall and panting open-mouthed for breath. His clothes hung in tatters and through the rents a rawness showed where tooth or nail had left its mark. The world wheeled round him dizzily, but through the whirl there was an exultant consciousness of victory, a consciousness, too, of rough hands upon his shoulders in kindliness, and through the roar of the blood still deafening his ears a sharp yelping, and more than one howl of a beast in its last agony. In very literal truth an end had been made: Giro was no longer Giro of the dogs. Lippo touched him.

"You are not so very much the worse, only a scratch here and there, deep enough, I grant, but in a week you will be your own man again. What did I say? A fighting

chance! and, by Paul! you fought! You are safe for us now: give me your parole——"

"No parole," said 'Tonio in a hoarse whisper, for his throat was parched. Already to his clearing brain had come back the memory of Faldora's danger, which, to him, meant danger to the Master: any day Fieravanti might return from Arzano.

"Then it is lock and key," answered Lippo. "But in a week you may go sup with Signor Carlo—if he invites you!"

CHAPTER XXV

THE DAY BEFORE THE NIGHT

TRIBALDA, as might be expected, was the soldier through and through. With nothing of the sentimental in him, he promptly vetoed any immediate attempt to rescue 'Tonio.

"We are too weak, signor," he said decisively, when Piero's tale had been retold. "As you know, there are some we cannot trust. Now, if we attack Lippo and leave these behind we must leave still more to hold them safe—which is impossible; we cannot spare the men: then, if we take them with us they will turn traitor the first chance——"

"As they will here, if the Casa is attacked," said 'Sandro. But Tribalda shook his head.

"It is not the same. Here they are packed among loyal men and at the first doubtful move the man next behind runs them through; but out there in the open and on horseback——" Again he shook his head. And, indeed, there was no need to finish. The difference was plain. Out in the open, treason could betray at its leisure. "Illustrissimo, here is the truth—we need another score or more men; Lippo is recruiting, I heard as much to-day."

"Forli!" said Faldora. "Tribalda, you must go to Forli and at once. Ride hard and—let me see, a day and a day and a day; yes, ride hard and in three days, four at the most, you will be here again. Then a day to rest and—um, yes five days hence—five days, and by God's mercy there will be an end to—to—Signor Lippo!" Always he boggled over the Lippo.

"Five days?" said Lucia, her voice pitiful. "Poor 'Tonio! Where will he be in five days?"

"God be good to him," said Tribalda very gravely, "but, signorina, we can do no better. Am I even certain of my men in the time?"

Silence chilled them. All knew that there in Fa'dora it was easy to say three days, four days at the most, but not so easy to force completion within the limit down at Forli. Tribalda might even fail utterly. Ordelaffi would know of the recruiting and might shut the gates against their going; he would be within his rights. Then, a faint colour showing where not much colour had shown of late, Lucia spoke again.

"Is it true that in Forli Ser Marco is—is—greatly beloved?"

"Signorina, they would die for him," said 'Sandro earnestly. Which, in a way, was true, but at the moment he was judging others by himself.

"Then if his life were in danger, and Count Girolamo refused aid——"

"You have hit it, my girl!" Out of his new-born vigour, almost youth, Faldora spoke briskly. "Tribalda, take this good fellow with you, go straight to Ordelaffi and tell him that Forli's maker of saints—oh, you will know what manner of tale to spin. 'Sandro here will add his word if needful. But hint the love of the common folk and what might follow if harm were to befall—you understand?"

"But, Illustrissimo," protested 'Sandro, "if there truly is danger to the Master I must be here——"

"'Sandro," said Lucia, the colour deepening a tone or two, "he would have you go, I am sure, sure, he would have you go," and 'Sandro, remembering the injunction laid so strongly upon him knew she was right. How better could he watch over the Madonna than by securing help

from Forli? Her danger was even greater than the Master's; besides, Fieravanti was in Arzano. He turned to Tribalda.

"I am ready, signor," he said briefly.

But when Tribalda would have gone to order the horses Faldora checked him.

"Not so fast! If you and he go thundering down the Castel-Cavo road in broad day Lippo will know it within an hour. Wait till it is dark and the folk all abed. Meanwhile, close the gates so that no man can carry tales to the village: from this hour Faldora is in siege."

So it was settled. Through a warm grey night of fine rain and low-hung mists Tribalda and the *scarpellino* rode upon their mission. If a door or two opened as they passed through the village at a footpace no man could have recognised them. For aught Brettinoro knew two of Lippo's men were busy on some devil's work, and whoso heard the fall of the horse-shoes thanked God when the clank died in the distance: the terror by night had passed by!

Because of the late sunset high amongst the hills, Tribalda's departure had been long delayed. The night was black dark as they passed Margotti's unhallowed resting-place, the day midway between dawn and noon when horses were changed at Castel-Cavo and hard upon gate-shutting when Forli was entered. Wasting no time they rode straight to the Castello. There Tribalda was sufficiently well known to be granted an immediate audience.

"Alone?" asked Conti curtly as he noted the signs of travel-haste.

"No!" Laying his plans as he rode Tribalda had decided against secrecy. To force Ordelaffi's hand, the more who knew of Fieravanti's danger the better: nor was it any surprise to find Amata Capponi amongst the five or six in attendance.

Very briefly the Captain of the Guard urged Faldora's request that he might recruit sufficient men to secure the Casa: of the intended attack on Lippo he said not a word. A pace or two behind him 'Sandro itching to speak, held his peace.

"Let every dog guard his own kennel, I have no men to waste." Ordelaffi was as brief.

"There is worse than sack and murder. Count Ascanio has a grand-daughter."

"Oh, la! la!" broke in Amata Capponi. "Let them dice for her: young Faldora is certain to win."

"Also, Illustrissimo," Tribalda kept his temper and respect admirably, though he had lost both, "there is a guest to share the danger—Marco Fieravanti."

"The chiseller?" Again it was Amata Capponi who spoke, but this time with a shift of tone; insolence had given place to vexed spleen. "Is he still a-making of saints? Let his saints keep him; my lord can stir no finger."

"You mistake, Illustrissima. We do not ask Count Girolamo to spare soldiers—no! But, my lord, give us leave to find men in Forli—Forli dearly loves Ser Marco: for Ser Marco's sake Forli will rise to a man. Almost, I think, Forli would go stark mad if harm befell Ser Marco, harm which Forli might have prevented had help been given——"

"Be quiet!" It was Amata Capponi whom Ordelaffi put down with a strong hand as she pressed forward, passion flaming in her eyes. "If you were a wife you could not be more curst! Fieravanti? Um, yes, that touches us more nearly." He paused, questioning Conti with a look. Dared they leave this maker of saints to his fate? Would it be safe? and Conti covertly shook his head: what Tribalda had said was true, Forli might go mad. "More nearly," repeated Ordelaffi, his voice growing brisker,

"much more nearly, since he is one of ourselves—our every own. Yes, for Marco Fieravanti's sake I consent. Conti, let it be known that for Marco Fieravanti's sake we permit the recruiting," and 'Sandro, whose face had gone white when Amata Capponi's had flamed, drew a sigh of relief and still held his peace. Had he spoken Amata Capponi might have learned some truths, but it is to be doubted if Tribalda's mission would have been advanced: 'Sandro was that doubtful diplomatist, an enthusiast who sees but his own side of the question.

It is enough to add that next day Tribalda secured his men and could have had five times the number for the asking. But though men were found quickly enough, some hours were necessarily cut to waste procuring horses and equipment; there were, too, hindrances at the last, so that it was hard on dusk when he passed the gates at the head of his troop. Thenceforward there were no delays except those inseparable from travelling rough roads in the dark.

It was not often that Ascanio Faldora changed his yea or nay, but on second thoughts he decided that Lucia's promise to Piero Buti should be redeemed by a housing at the Casa rather than a guard in the *vico*. The later plan had two advantages, the garrison was not weakened, and intercourse with the village, gossip which in spite of prohibition might have said, Tribalda has ridden to Forli to hunt men, was prevented. Let it be added that Piero's fears were without foundation. There was no harrying of the empty house. If Lippo knew of the warning given by the lad he was too busy preparing to hawk the heron to heed the sparrow.

And signs of that hawking were clear on the second day after Tribalda's departing when a maid of the Casa was found by her mistress with her arms on the flat of a table, her head on her clenched hands and she sobbing

as if her heart were broken—though it is to be doubted whether hearts which are truly broken are not too sorrowful for the relief of tears.

Now, there had been a time, and not so long before, when Lucia Faldora would have passed the tears by with hardly a second thought and certainly no second glance. But there is this quality in love, it expands the sympathies and for very joy of its own happiness must needs strive for the happiness of others, else it is not true love. Stooping over the girl Lucia laid a firm hand gently on the shaken shoulders.

"What is it, child? Has Nello been unkind?"

At the sound of the voice rather than at the touch the girl started to her feet and stood quaking: though the pretty, soft mouth was trembling pitifully there was such a terror behind the tears in the eyes that self-reproach smote her mistress. What? Had she been so hard in spirit, so little a woman, that her very nearness was a fear to those who served her? Truly she had much to learn! Not easily did the girl force control; then,

"It is nothing, Madonna, nothing at all. Nello? Oh, no, no, Nello is—is——" and then to prove that nothing was amiss she wept bitterly and unashamed, her hands gripping one another till the knuckles showed white through the red of the coarsened skin.

"Tell me, Joana." Never had Joana heard so soft a voice. "We women do not cry our hearts out over nothings. Tell me: what am I but a woman like yourself? I shall understand, be sure I shall understand. And it is Nello, is it not?"

Nello? Every one in the Casa knew swaggering, light-hearted Nello—Nello of the gay laugh, the gay reds and blues, the ready laugh and sunny temper, and how he and pretty, feather-headed Joana had plighted a troth over

which Father Bernardo shook his head. That Nello, being Nello, should cause tears seemed a certainty; but the girl's answer was an astonishment.

"Nello? Oh, no! no! It is you, Madonna—you! For the love of Mary——" She checked the outburst a moment, choking, then the flood of words was loosed again and loosed yet more strongly. "He will be angry, but I don't care, no, I don't care. Madonna, do not sleep in the Casa to-night—oh, *Dio mio! Dio mio!* what shall I do! what shall I do!" and again the tears flowed.

"Not sleep in the Casa? Why, Joana?" If a tremor, a quiver as from a shiver of the heart, ran through her she gave no sign. "Oh, but it is no use to shake your head; you must tell me! See, now; no harm will come to you or Nello: for, after all, it is Nello, is it not?" But the girl, her face hid in her hands as she rocked back and forwards, only shook her head afresh. Of course it was Nello. Had it not been Nello there would have been no need for tears. Lucia Faldora's voice grew firmer, more insistent; lives to the score were in the balance. "If you will not tell me, then Count Ascanio——"

"Oh, no! no! Madonna, no! no! not that!—not that! He would hang Nello, I know he would." Terror was again rampant in her eyes as she looked up, the tears drying for very fear. "Madonna, for the love of Christ have mercy."

"And what mercy will Lippo have? Yes, Lippo," she repeated with a firmness that was almost stern as the girl shrank. "See, I have promised that no harm shall come to your Nello, though if my lord hung him for his treason it would be his deserts. What? He eats our bread and plays spy for Lippo—Lippo, who burns the mother and the children, little small children, babes almost! Joana, is that your womanhood?"

"Madonna, I love him, God only knows how I love him."

The reproach had been elliptical, but Joana understood and now the answer softened the girl who also loved much. What was it the Florentine had said? Love that reckons conditions is not love? And, after all, what was Nello but a gay-hearted, thoughtless boy as feather-headed as Joana herself?

"You have my promise; no harm will come to your Nello," said Lucia more gently. "Answer me now, is this the truth? Lippo will attack the Casa to-night and Nello has warned you to find safety, lest in the darkness—But how can you? The doors are guarded: no one may quit the Casa?"

"He will be at the small postern, Madonna, and let us through——"

"Us? Do you think I would save myself and leave the rest to Lippo?"

"But, Madonna," Joana hesitated an instant, shivering, "it is not just what may happen by accident in the dark——"

"No!" said Lucia bitterly, "it is not accidents we dread, we women, not where there are Lippos! God be praised, I am not afraid to die. But is what I have said truth?"

"Yes, Madonna."

"Well—dry your tears: you shall go, both you and your Nello."

She paused in deep thought. To promise safety to the girl's lover was one thing, to win her grandfather's consent another! Consent? He would never consent! Her pledge to Piero had been honoured, but this touched the safety of the Casa and he would tell her bluntly that she had neither the right nor the power to give such promises. Without doubt feather-headed Nello would hang, and most likely hang in front of the very postern he would have betrayed: that would be a warning quite in keeping with

Ascanio Faldora's grim temper. What then? Her word was pledged and she, too, was a Faldora! She saw but one way. The two must be let slip through the postern which could then be locked and barred behind them: afterwards she would tell her grandfather.

"At what hour is Nello on guard?"

She hesitated a moment; then "In an hour, Madonna: but it is at night he will contrive——"

"Come to me an hour from now. How many more traitors are there?"

"Madonna, I know nothing—nothing at all;" the answer came in a whimper.

"Dry your eyes: you shall go scatheless, you and your Nello: unless, that is, you so play the fool within the next hour that you hang him. Come to me as I have bidden you."

But, left to herself, she was in two minds whether, after all, she ought not to go straight with her news to Count Ascanio. Her own question, How many more traitors are there? troubled her. She had expected no other answer, had, indeed, flung the question half in contempt; but doubtless Nello knew, and just as doubtless Count Ascanio had stern means of extracting answers from unwilling tongues. There were chambers hidden away out of sight in the depths of Casa Faldora whose very memory was a terror! Never had their grim contents been used in her day, but most certainly Count Ascanio would remember their use and Nello's unwilling tongue would speak. And to know who was traitor might be vital—vital. Yet, dared she? What was Nello but a boy? And, after all, it was through Joana's love she had gleaned even so much of the truth. Could she, then, a fellow-woman who loved, could she send Nello to such a doom? Would Marco wish it? All unconsciously her eyes grew tender—wistful: thank God, Marco was safe. Hardly knowing, she

broke off her troubled train of thought and stood a moment with head bowed upon her clasped hands—Thank God, Marco Fieravanti was safe! Then, perhaps it was the sudden accession of tenderness, perhaps the simple answer to the question she had put to herself, but without an instant's hesitation decision came: Nello must go free!

CHAPTER XXVI

TWILIGHT

An hour later was not a usual time for the mistress of the Casa to be in the quarter whence opened the small door whose hinges bore Giro's cunning handiwork. But through those days of siege many things were unusual, and so her unexpected appearance excited no comment, any more than that Joana, who attended her, should be white-faced and showing plain signs of tears. If any were curious they found a solution for both Lucia Faldora's presence and the girl's swollen eyelids when the two turned into the passage at whose end Nello stood on guard—the young fools had fallen out, and the mistress was there to patch the quarrel: a solution which played into Lucia's hands, since not even curiosity would be bold enough to invite rebuke by spying. It has been said that Lucia Faldora could, at times, use her tongue caustically.

From the door, where he stood leaning on his pike-handle, Nello viewed the approach with a vague uneasiness which was not long left in doubt. Lucia, sternly contemptuous, went to her point with curt brevity and ruthless clearness.

"Go, the two of you. For you, Nello, Faldora is well rid of you, but never forget you owe her a life. If you had your due you would hang, and you know it."

"Signorina, I—I——" Surprised, as it were, flank and rear, Nello floundered, stammering.

"Lippo's spy!" The sharp edge of the contempt cut

so like a knife that the girl at her side gasped. "You were to open the door for him to-night——"

"No, signorina, no——"

But though the denial was true, since Lippo had no need of an open door, she silenced him for a liar.

"We know! You who ate our bread would give us to Lippo dead or living—give us in our sleep! You coward! You vileness worse than coward! What? Have you forgotten Margotti? Not you, or you would not be so eager to see Joana safe! Safe from what? Oh, that I had words to show you what you are! You would give us up to Lippo—Lippo who burnt the little children, to Giro of the dogs who laughed to see them burn: you would give us to that—that! Aye, and to worse, or why must Joana go shivering into the night?" Then, as is the way of women, good women, suddenly she softened and the tears which had never smarted her eyes in the revelation of the danger an hour before broke raining down her cheeks. "Oh, Nello, Nello, how could you? how could you? We trusted you because we thought you loved us and you have the heart of a stone."

For a moment there was a dumb silence broken only by a dual sobbing: Joana, at her mistress' side, was weeping open-mouthed and unashamed. Then a spasm shook Nello. His face had gone first red then ashen, now all the fresh comeliness of his debonair youth was wiped from it as one wipes breath from glass.

"Signorina!" he cried, "I never thought, as God lives I never thought, Giro came and talked and I listened like a fool, but I never thought of—of—the afterwards. Lippo? Damn Lippo! Madonna, I'm on your side, and if they come——"

"If?" said Lucia catching at the word as he checked, swallowing, "is there an if at all?"

"No, no if—they'll come. But there's one less on their

side and maybe there will be others before night. Trust me; Madonna, for God's sake trust me."

There was no great light in the passage, only what came through a loophole high up in the thickness of the wall, but what she saw satisfied Lucia: youth which does not think of the afterwards is a bad liar.

"I trust you. Remember, it is Joana's life—all our lives; Lippo has no pity," she said laconically and turned to the girl. "There, dry your eyes, child. You may stay here, and if any blames you say I gave you leave. God knows, there may be little of the world left to both of you."

But now, quitting them, she was in the throes of a fresh doubt. That there were Lippo's men mixed through the garrison she knew; if she brought a plain tale to Count Ascanio he would, being Count Ascanio, seize on Nello and from him force the names. Was that wise? Knowing they had no mercy to expect they would certainly resist arrest, and fighting for their lives would take life. Could such loss be borne with the garrison already dangerously weak? And would the evil end there? Would not suspicion, every man doubting his neighbour's loyalty, spread like a rot to the great weakening of the defence? Then she remembered that Tribalda had less fear of treason at close quarters than in the open and that decided her: Count Ascanio must be warned of the coming attack but she would name no names.

She found him in the great hall with old Ricci, the sergeant of the guard who was in command during Tribalda's absence. Bidding him remain, she went as briefly to her point as when she flung Nello's treachery in his face.

"Tribalda will be too late: Lippo forestalls us and comes to-night."

"Comes? Lippo comes? Speak plainer: what do you mean?"

"Tribalda told us Lippo has been gathering men. He must have found all he needs since I know for certain that he will attack the Casa to-night."

"You know? From whom?" The fine capillaries in the weather-bitten lean cheeks grew tinged.

"Do not ask," she pleaded, answering the look rather than the words. "Is it not enough that we are warned in time?"

For a moment it seemed as if his old intolerance of opposition would have swept aside her plea in an outburst of passion: but she met his gathering wrath without flinching, and yet with such an appeal that he choked back his anger.

"What's this? Another pledge? By Holy Paul, girl, you take too much upon you, you and your pledges! But I know you—if you won't speak you won't! To-night? When?"

"Nothing is known—just to-night."

"Let him come! He will not be the first who has broken his knuckles on the old walls! Tribalda will be in time yet!"

"You remember? He warned us Lippo had spies——"

"Worthy friends of Signor Roverella!" Who can reproduce the bitterness of the scorn? "Leave all that to me. Ricci knows whom to suspect. Tell her, Ricci."

"It is a guess, signorina." But it struck Lucia with a chill that from the list of six or eight which followed Nello's name was absent. If Nello was unsuspected, then how many more were on Lippo's side? But she urged no doubts. Such an urging would have been met, and rightly met, with the retort, "Since you know so much give us the names yourself!"

To all outward appearances that day differed in nothing from the one which had gone before; always the gates were closed, the door fast shut and guarded, but Faldora had

decided, and wisely, that until nightfall there should be no open preparation to meet the attack. There was, in truth, little to be done and the shorter notice the less time there would be to fret the nerve in waiting. The most notable difference, yet one which escaped unread, was Count Ascanio's buoyance of spirit. Never since the day when, in Fieravanti's workshop, he had ordered Signor Roverella's horse to be made ready for him had he been gay; so cheerful was he that were it not for his great age and dignity one could have imagined him whistling or singing to himself, even as he went up or down those empty stairs where the echo of children's small feet seemed more remote than ever.

And Lucia Faldora? Serene of face, no paler than of late, she went about her accustomed duties seeming to do neither more nor less. That she should spend an hour nursing the sleeping Marietta to her bosom was natural, the child being fretful in her strange surroundings. And in bringing peace to others the girl won peace to herself, as is the law of the highest that is in us, soothing the child and calming her own half unconscious rebellion that she might never again look on Marco Fieravanti's face, that the end might come—always she recognised that Lippo's knuckles might beat down the ancient walls and the end come—and her love pass into the shadows unrevealed. Is there a greater tragedy in life than that the greatest thing in the world should die without expression?

Strange, the flat contradictions which can hold their place in the heart at the one moment. Rocking the sleeping child softly she thanked God Marco Fieravanti was safe out of Faldora, and in the same breath hungered with an aching, wistful crave for a last sight of his face. Without a doubt it was the same contradiction which, as she crossed the hall two hours before sunset, made her pause, shivering, even while her heart exulted to hear

Fieravanti's voice at the gate asking Ricci if all were well.

"Well and ill," answered Ricci. "But you will find fewer than when you left."

"Count Ascanio? Madonna Lucia?" Listening, she caught the shock of fear, the hint of desolation, in the voice and smiled, her eyes growing tender.

"Here and well. But come within, signor. It's a long story and my lord had best tell it himself. I'll say this, never was a man more welcome."

Turning, Lucia went slowly up the great stairway. Not at that moment could she meet him. Never more welcome? With the thrill of exultation tingling through her, warming her as wine warms starvation, she told herself that it was true: let the end be what it might, thank God she would see his face once again. Nor was that all. There was comfort in the thought that let the night hold for them what it might they would face it together.

It was characteristic of Ascanio Faldora that with fire and sack knocking at his doors he abated no jot of his accustomed ceremony. As always, old Giuseppe's wand tapped its way along the worn flags, and the candles before and behind guttered blue in the summer twilight of the ill-lit corridors as Fieravanti, promoted to his host's elbow, discoursed of the progress in the Arzano defences. There was the familiar pause at the supper-room door, the passing in between the lights and from above and below the salt the old grave salutations. Then while all were on their feet for Father Bernardo's grace Lucia Faldora slipped by way of a side-door quietly to her place at Count Ascanio's right hand. Her colour was a little warmer than through these last days, and if her smile of welcome had an unexpected quality Fieravanti found an easy explanation—she who was good to the poor would surely understand his anxiety over Anthony Hawk?

Truly that was a strange supper party. Upon five at

least—Father Bernardo, as well as the maker of saints, had been taken into confidence—Ricci and Nello supped in the guard-room—lay the shadow of a terrible uncertainty, yet four ate and drank tranquilly and with no apparent thought beyond the passing of the hour: only Joana, below the salt, shivered at times. At the head of the table old Faldora was courteously interested in his guest's interests in Arzano: of 'Tonio no word was said, nor were Tribalda or 'Sandro mentioned. To a careless onlooker nothing was changed, nothing differed from any supper hour of the past year, and yet when, at its close, Count Ascanio rose to his feet as he had risen once before, a sigh ran the length of the table as if held breath had suddenly been released. And, as before, the double line of faces were bent forward, faces paler than when the health of Faldoras yet to be was drunk, faces with the eyes strained and the mouths of the women crushed to a thin line: only Joana kept her place, sitting back shivering on her settle.

"What I have to say is no news to some of you. For them I shall have a word presently, but listen all. Lippo may be fool enough to assault the Casa to-night. Let him, say I! You women will keep to your own quarters, with Father Luca for ghostly comfort lest you grow afraid. You men, all of you, assemble in the great hall at the stroke of nine; there Ricci will give you your orders. If they break through—they will not—but if they do there can be no quarter: it is your life or theirs."

He paused, looking up and down the table in silence, his glance, hard and fiercely stern, pausing a second's space now on this face now on that. When he spoke again his voice, always curt, always cold, since curtness and coldness made for the bracing of raw nerves, had grown yet curter, colder, more incisively significant.

"There can be no quarter," he repeated with a rising emphasis. "Remember that, you who are Lippo's men.

To you I say this last word—even now it is not too late. Keep faith to your bread and salt and all's well; Faldora never forgets: but waver an instant, let treachery so much as bat an eyelid, and——" Again he paused, this time shaking an open hand above his head as he stooped forward. "So help me God!" he ended, nor were more words needed. "Father, a grace."

If the priest's voice, deeper than common, more solemn than common, shook over the familiar words who can wonder? How many who gave thanks for meat would never eat again at that table? Faldora's obstinate faith in his ancient walls might say "they will not break through," but in his heavy heart Father Bernardo could find no such comfortable assurance.

In the silence which followed the deep "Amen" Count Ascanio turned briskly to Lucia, a hand on her arm.

"Go with them," and he nodded down the table at the women, now white faced and scared of they knew not what. "Some of them will need comfort, poor souls; your comfort, a woman's comfort rather than a priest's. Tell them there is nothing to fear."

"But I cannot. I do fear—fear greatly. Oh, not for myself, but that they will find a way in. Giro knows the Casa from end to end as you do."

"Giro? Giro of the dogs? Signor Roverella's friend? Be easy. Ricci and I will make the rounds presently and see that all is well. No rat on four legs or two will find a hole. Come, Ser Marco, let us descend to the hall."

"But surely," said Fieravanti, touching lightly the sleeve of purple silk with its elaborate lace frilling at the wrists, "you will discard this for more serviceable stuff?"

"What? Put on chain mail when Signor Roverella honours Faldora with a visit? No, as I am, as I am. Or stay, there is one change I shall make—a sword blade six inches longer than this courtesy toy will not come amiss!"

CHAPTER XXVII

NIGHT

Because of her ministrations in the women's wing, ministrations more sorely needed than even Faldora's shrewd experience had imagined, Lucia was not present at the muster in the great hall when nine struck. It was a mixed gathering and Count Ascanio, on the third step of the wide stairway, smiled in grim derision as he surveyed the medley of pikemen, lackeys, scullions and cooks who made up Faldora of Pesaro's last command. Or, perhaps, not quite the last: Lippo would fail, Tribalda would return in time, and the last command would be a ride up the valley with the free winds of God in his face.

Stamping a foot for silence he spoke as he had spoken at the supper-table, but, there being now no women present, with a sharper, sterner directness. No need to give the curt address at length. If Lippo's scum broke in there would be no quarter; Lippo would give none—let them remember Margotti and strike home: no man who did a man's duty would be forgotten: to that Faldora of Pesaro set his oath. Then came a warning, now almost brutal in its concise clearness; neither God nor man had mercy for traitors, and upon that he dismissed them to Ricci's orders that guards might be set. Be sure that possible treason was closely watched and knew it.

No need, either, to tell how the hours, a hundred minutes long, every one of them, dragged on their slow length. Whoso has watched, whether for life or for death, waiting

uncertainly for the unknown, uncertain in time but sure in event, will understand. In the women's wing Lucia Faldora had scant time for her own thoughts. Count Ascanio might say that Lippo would not come until the small dark hours, but who could be sure? They couldn't, poor souls. Lippo? They heard Lippo in every ring of an iron heel outside their barred door, Lippo in every clang of a grounded pikehandle as the guards were changed, Lippo in the hoot of an owl foraging through the summer night, Lippo in every windy gust that set the trees clashing.

And so hearing some cried softly, some sat apart shivering, others knelt bowed before the shrine where Our Lady of Comfort stood in her blue niche with its sprinkling of gilded stars, while others, some one or two, wept aloud, if weeping it could be called where terror was tearless and the sobs came harshly dry from dry throats. No! Neither Lucia Faldora nor the priest had much leisure to think upon their own case, and it may be that therein lay God's mercy. But as the hours passed and still Lippo did not come, the reaction of exhausted nature compelled an apathy. Tears dried unwiped, sobbing ceased, through simple weariness some slept, and so there was no protest, an indifference almost, when Lucia Faldora quietly unbarred the door and passed without. Her work there was done. Imagination had beggared reality, leaving the present poor; even though Lippo came there would never again be the same terror.

The great hall was ablaze with light. It was Count Ascanio's belief that if Lippo found the Casa vigilantly on its guard, and no surprise possible, prudence might give him pause, thus allowing time for Tribalda to return. So on every sconce a lamp was set, into every ring-socket a flaring torch thrust, until the wide-flung space glowed as never in a noon sun. He even caused the great door

to be opened, that between the bars of the gate the glare might flood the night with warning.

Into this brightness the girl descended to find a score of the garrison following their own devices, gossiping in undertones, playing *micare* or throwing a cast of the dice, and Count Ascanio pacing the flags alone. Hearing her step, he turned to meet her.

"All quiet?"

"All quiet—now. Where is Ser Marco?"

"He and Ricci have gone the rounds. But they might spare the trouble; he will not come, he is not such a fool."

"The rounds? Will it take long?"

"Half an hour, perhaps."

She paused, her grave eyes gravely on his. Although the growing quiet of the women's quarters had afforded time for thought no course of action had taken definite shape in her mind, yet she was conscious that here was a check. Vaguely, but without a doubt, she had counted on meeting Fieravanti at once, then, somehow, they would draw apart and through the strangeness of the night the barriers she had set up between would break of themselves. Beyond that she had not gone, except that even with the barriers flattened there would be no passion, the hour was too grave, the issues of the night too uncertain for passion: strong emotion would be out of place and—and—she herself was passionless. So she told herself. That, vaguely, had been her thought as she descended the stairs; now, as is so often the case in the great crises of life, nothing had fallen out as she had foreseen. Half an hour? All unemotional though she was she could not endure to listen to her grandfather's contempt of Carlo Faldora for half an hour.

"Half an hour?" she repeated. "You will find me in the chapel if I am wanted."

"Aye, go pray: that is woman's work," he said, not sneeringly or contemptuously, but like one who gave a convinced opinion. "Though what half an hour has to do with it I do not see. Signor Roverella will not come."

"Please God!" she answered, but so doubtfully that it was clear she had no doubt.

Often we are influenced by expressions of opinion we think we despise. The doubt set Faldora thinking. Perhaps it was the thought of what the doubt stood for, perhaps the strain of waiting had its will upon him at last, but as he resumed his restless pacing, striding from the fanning-out of the wide staircase to the open door and back again, the buoyance of the past hours had ebbed away, leaving him pinched and older even than his years. Be that as it may, whether doubt or strain, the result of his thought was quickly made clear on Fieravanti's return.

"All's well?" he repeated querulously. "Of course all's well. Nevertheless——" He broke off, tugging at the buckle which fastened the dagger into place on his right hip, a slender blade in a sheath of damascened steel. Freeing the weapon he held it out, girdle and all. "Nevertheless take this to the signorina. You will find her in the chapel."

"This?"

"Um—Signor Roverella may come, may he not?"

"Yes. But even so?"

"God's name, man! Would you have her fall alive into his hands? You do not understand? No: how could you—being you! I would have you know that our women do not find it hard to die. Give her the dagger; she'll need no telling when to use it."

"But surely——" Fieravanti began, aghast. But Faldora thrust the embroidered girdle into his hands impatiently.

"Surely, surely. By Holy Paul! I would do it with my own hand if needs were. Trust her alive to that cogger of dice after all that has come and gone? No! not with a College of Cardinals to see to the sacrament. I would sooner she married Ricci or—or—you. And Signor Roverella might trouble no priest. Trust him? Not I and not she, or she is no true Faldora! Go, I must not leave the gate—though he won't come: would God he would, but he won't, he won't."

And just about that hour, the camp being a-crawl with life under the tawny glare of smoky resinous torches tied to posts set here and there in the open, Lippo was unlocking the door of the hut where 'Tonio nursed his hurts, easing his sense of impotence through the long hours of the day with words which may not be set down at length. His two-day-old scratches were mending, helped by a 'pothecary's salve provided by the thief, but the stiff soreness of racked muscles and over-strained joints had not yet worn off.

In all respects he was well treated. Meat and drink he had in plenty, a coarse blanket spread over beaten straw was bed enough and—Giro being kept at a distance—there was a kindly enough fellowship in the rough service which ministered to his needs: Giro's dogs had not been loved. Nor was his a forced confinement. Each morning Lippo had said, "Give me your parole for a week and I leave the door open;" but steadily he had refused, partly from an English obstinacy, partly because always he had a vague hope of some stroke of luck falling his way, but partly, let it be admitted, because he could have made but a halting use of liberty with his wounds unhealed and aches irking every limb.

Left without a lamp he had slept soon after the fall of night only to be awakened after two or three hours by

the unwonted stir in the camp. Under the ill-fitting, stout-built door a line of light cut into the darkness; voices were calling outside, there was a stamping of hoofs on the hard ground, the nicker of horses, the rumble and turmoil of busy activity clearer, sharper, through the night's silences, than twice the noise by day. Rising on his knees 'Tonio listened, cursing his helplessness through shut teeth, his one unfailing consolation being that the Master was safe in Arzano.

For Madonna Lucia or the old lord he had little fear—they would be caught sleeping, and being taken without a struggle would come to no hurt. Tribalda and the guard? Even while he cursed he shrugged, grimacing. It was not an age when men gave much thought to men: brute violence and sudden death were the commonplace of life—Tribalda and the guard must dree their weird. Without a doubt they must pass—some of them: pray God they took toll before they passed. And as he knelt, listening, itching through his stiff soreness to be at that taking of toll, the key grated in the lock and Lippo came.

"Are you awake, Hawk?" he said, speaking from the door as he peered from under the lantern held aloft. "What? my lambs roused you, did they? Wait, all will be quiet enough presently; you and the horses—or most of them—will have the camp to yourselves. Whatever walks on two legs goes a-visiting with Signor Carlo. Horses? Only enough to bring back the gifts of Signor Carlo's liberal heart," and he laughed. "If I know that heart it will open wide to-night. To-morrow you may sup with him at Faldora—if you and he choose! Have you need of anything?"

"Murder in the dark," said Hawk. "It's damnable, Lippo, damnable."

"It will be daylight, if that makes it any better!" said

Lippo and laughed again, less pleasantly. "No darkness for me: nor broad day, you understand, but dusk enough to see lest there should be accidents."

"Then, please God you will have the village on your back."

"No fear! We'll see neither hide nor hair of one of them. They'll remember Margotti. Some blame me there, but Margotti has his uses to this day. Margotti? Margotti was mercy—mercy! Why, fear of him will save a score of lives to-night, but one gets no credit for one's good deeds," and he pulled-to the door. Listening, Hawk heard the bolt of the lock shot home, grating.

And soon the predicted quietness possessed the night; the only sounds came from the horses, restless in their stalls: then these, too, quieted to that stillness of which we know nothing but which we call the stillness of death.

But 'Tonio did not sleep again; the very stillness, seeming to listen with him, kept him awake. Wrapped in his blanket he lay staring at the invisible crack below the ill-fitting door where, the torches being extinguished, he had last seen light, staring and listening—listening. It was, of course, all a trick of the imagination, but it was as if, through the dumb silence he could hear from far down the curves of the valley the splintering of the wooden hinges Lippo had once boasted over, the splintering, the rush of feet and a cry.

Anthony Hawk was no weakling, but he shivered under his blanket and whispered, "God help them!" to the dark: Lippo he knew for a brute and a cruel devil, "God help the poor souls." Then, suddenly, he was aware that a greyness filtered through the intense black of the dark, and while he drew a lingering breath, staring harder, a bird called a note or two, called drowsily to be answered by another and another until the woods, like the world, were awake to the unknown of a new day.

Sitting up, 'Tonio smote his hands together. God in heaven! What were they doing down at Faldora? Tribalda? A good fellow, Tribalda. There could be little hope that he would see the sunrise. But surely the Madonna would be safe? Surely not even a brute like Lippo—— Then he remembered Carlo Faldora and groaned aloud at his impotence, cursing useless curses, only to check himself and rear upright on his knees, listening, but not now for that far-off cry of a parting soul.

Surely there was a stir in the camp? A footfall on the ground trodden so bare of grass as to be hard as a pavement in the dryness of the July heat?

"Hulloa!" he shouted, beating on the door with clenched fists, "Hulloa! Hulloa!" then paused, straining to hear. But the footfall had ceased and he shouted again, louder than before, "Hulloa! Hulloa! Hulloa!" and again paused, listening. There was the tramp again! He heard it coming nearer, nearer; and so hearing beat his skinned knuckles on the door nor ever knew that they bled afresh.

"Here!" he called, "here; the second hut from the corner: turn the key—the key! for God's sake turn the key and make haste!"

Again the footfalls ceased; Hawk was conscious of heavy breathing beyond the door, then came a jangle as of a key touched uncertainly.

"All's well," said 'Tonio, choking his impatience to conciliation lest he should scare away freedom. "I am Hawk —Hawk, who fought Giro's dogs," and the key was turned.

Dragging the door open 'Tonio stood an instant blinking at the stronger light. All unconsciously at the moment, but to return to memory later, he saw the camp a void, the sunlight yellow on the rocky crest of the far off ridge, and, facing him, arm's length away, a peasant of the hills who trafficked for the outlaws and who, in the empty camp saw an end to his gains.

"Gone?" he stammered. "Where—where——"

But Hawk pushed past him, hardly conscious of the soreness in his racked muscles. His halting limp quickened to a walk, then gritting his teeth he ran, calling back, "It's Faldora! They are sacking Faldora! If you have sense keep clear of the millstones." Seven minutes later he was galloping out of camp, swaying as he rode and still gritting his teeth but holding his place in the saddle. The peasant had already disappeared, scared to the marrow by the raspings of such millstones as Lippo and Ascanio Faldora.

CHAPTER XXVIII

SUNRISE

Not even the great Florentine himself had found the going down and up another's stairs so hard a road as Fieravanti found the ascent to the chapel where he had been bidden find Lucia Faldora in prayer. Conceive the conflict within him—to say to the dear woman he loved, but to whom no word of love might be spoken, Your grandfather sends you this! and put the dagger in her hands. And not without reason. Count Ascanio's Faldora pride might say, How could such as you understand! but the maker of saints knew the ruthlessness of the times as clearly as any Faldora, knew that in fire and sack there was pity neither for tottering age nor babe at the breast, nor, let success grow drunken, would there be bit or bridle to the after licence. Without a doubt, better the mercies of God than fall living into the hands of Lippo and his vile crew. Carlo Faldora? Carlo Faldora's last words as he flung out of the workshop had been such a threat as lent the dagger an edge.

No, it was not astonished horror at the thought which shook Fieravanti as he slowly climbed the stairs, it was that Faldora should so suddenly have sensed the nearness of such an extremity and that of all men he, Marco Fieravanti, should darken the chapel with such a shadow of death. Then as he drew near the top step he was doubly comforted: Lippo—Carlo Faldora, would not come. In another twenty-four hours Tribalda would return and all

be well. But if he came, Lippo or that other untrusted by his own blood, and coming prevailed to the need for a dagger-point, he at least, he, Marco Fieravanti, would know nothing of that last terrible call upon God's mercies —he would have gone before.

Drawing aside the heavy curtain which masked the ever-open door of the chapel, Fieravanti stood for a moment looking within. With the great hall and all the lower passage-ways ablaze with flaring lights, here alone was dimness, one solitary silver lamp, swung by a chain from the roof, cast a mild radiance on the glory of the altar, a *"Pater, dimitte illis,"* of the dying Christ whose head, after the outwrung prayer, had sunk forward for the last time, the parted lips ready to whisper their eternal "It is finished." There, upon such a night as this, surely Lucia Faldora would be found. But no kneeling white-robed figure bowed upon the altar rail; the chapel was empty, its solemn stillness unbroken even by a heartbeat.

Where then? Dropping the curtain Fieravanti stood considering. Upon this upper floor lamps were fewer, no more than floating wicks most of them: into the dimness of a passage a fuller light suffused through a door half opened and Fieravanti's heart leaped as he recognised the door of his workshop. There? Perhaps! The thought warmed him. She had seemed so indifferent, so marble-cold to the work which lay so near his heart. It might be that he had misjudged, misunderstood. Certainly in that surrounding it would be less difficult to fulfil his task than there before the altar.

On the threshold he paused, scarcely daring to breathe and yet choked for breath, so moved was he. In the middle of the room stood his clay model, shifted on its turntable sideways to the door; beyond, a lamp turned low flamed dimly from a moveable standard; a little to one side the marble, as yet amorphous, grotesque in its rude suggestion,

glimmered ghostly in the half light. These he saw, but saw vaguely; it was Lucia Faldora, white as the marble, who held his eyes. Chin on breast, her mouth resting on her clasped hands she knelt on the bare floor in front of the as yet unfinished Great Mother: not even in the chapel was there a greater stillness.

Though in that stillness she must have heard his coming she gave no immediate sign but knelt on. Nor was that strange. It might well be that the cry of spirit to Spirit had not yet ended its dumb petition; it may be that, recognising his footfall, not at once dared she trust herself to look up, or it may be that she was still uncertain of what might follow and so paused to shape her course. But presently the clasped hands fell slowly apart; lifting her head she looked him in the face and rose.

Once again her infinite variety came to Fieravanti as a surprise. Never yet had he seen such a look, the wistful tenderness, the mute, fearless avowal, the dumb confession, the passionless passion, the eyes aglow as if with a light from within: surely even to humanity there is, in its moments of exaltation, such a thing as Transfiguration? Unnoticed, Count Ascanio's embroidered girdle and all it held slipped from his fingers: kneeling he caught her hands in his and held them to his lips, shivering; withdrawing one she laid it on his bent head, touching him with trembling finger-tips.

"Marco—my Marco!" she said softly, and rising he caught her to his breast.

"Sweet! Oh, my sweet, my sweet," he whispered. "God be thanked! Yes, though the world end to-night, God be thanked!" Seating her on a bench he knelt again before her, her hands in his.

How long? Longer than they knew, yet not long enough for either to unpack all that had lain hidden in the heart. Often there were silences, often only a murmured word

or two, sometimes a "God be thanked," and once at least—this was Fieravanti—a "God be merciful! Oh God! Oh God! be merciful!" But between the silences and the throb of the heart breaking out into whispered words there was much to be told, much to be explained; chiefly, on Lucia Faldora's part, the coming of that guest of the Custom who had stripped away the husks of pride. Then, shifting as he stooped over her, Fieravanti's eyes caught the glint of a damascened sheath lying on the floor beyond the statue, and heaven dissolved into the hard realities of the hour.

"Gird it upon me," she said when he told her, not easily, of old Faldora's message. And as his arms clasped her about, his fingers shaking as he tightened the buckle, she laid her hands on his shoulders, her face very wan in the lamplight. "Then it was for the honour of the name, but now——" Pausing she lifted her mouth to his. "Now it is for the honour of Marco Fieravanti. Have no fear for me, my heart, no fear at all. Either this will pass and we shall be together or—or—we shall still be together, but not here."

At the chapel door they halted and her arms went round him in a last "God be with you!" Passionately? With the hard-held passion of the woman who loves without conditions, yet for very love's sake dares not loosen its fulness lest she make the farewell too sore a sorrow by the revelation. But Fieravanti understood; his last kiss was upon her forehead, a sacring, a touch as of a chrism: not with the pulse of man's passion throbbing hot in her veins should she go into the Presence to wait for—God alone knew what!

At the foot of the stairs, as if upon the watch for his return, Fieravanti found Father Bernardo. Always kindly, always more than friendly in his warm admiration, there was now almost such a tender affection in the

priest's shrewd eyes as that which held the girl he loved in its regard.

"Lucia?"

"In the chapel—waiting."

"Yes, and watching! That is the woman's lot, to wait and watch: the man's part is easier. I confessed her to-day; would God all the world were as white-souled." Taking the sculptor's hand in both his he pressed it closely. "His wisdom be with you both," he said with significant earnestness. "She is very dear to me, very dear, and great with a greatness she keeps hidden out of sight," and Fieravanti understood that though what had passed in that confession was for God and the priest and no other, Father Bernardo was more than ever his friend.

"Watch over her, Father," was all he answered, but it was enough:

"A greater than I, my son. And if there is need at all I must be about His business to-night. If Lippo comes there will be a priest's work to be done in terrible earnest. But with every minute safety is more certain. See, there is a greyness in the sky. Shall I waken Count Ascanio?"

"He is asleep, then?"

"Yes—outworn! There he is on the bench beyond the hearth: at the last nature was too strong for him—as she is for us all!" he added, a smile puckering his lips an instant. "God be thanked for nature—at times! Shall I waken him?"

"Better; it would vex him to sleep the night away and morning is almost on us."

Nor was the rousing difficult. In that second nature which we call habit he was on his feet at a touch, fierce-eyed and broad awake, a hand by instinct on the hilt of the sword which was no toy blade but a length fit to cross with Lippo—or Signor Roverella.

"Has he come?" Not "they," be it noticed, but "he";

it is to be doubted if truly he gave thought to any one beyond Carlo Faldora.

"No, and day is breaking."

With a straightening of the back, and an alert shaking of the shoulders, as if to throw off their stiffness, he turned and strode to the shut gates. There he stood a moment, grasping the bars as he stared out and upward. In the mountains dawn comes quickly; the greyness had paled to the deeper colour of the dove, and already the flaring glare of the torches showed garish and unreal in the purer light of increasing day.

"He will not come! Signor Roverella is less a fool than I thought. He will not come!" Faldora repeated, disappointed, and turned from the gate. But even as he turned a hollow rumble broke the ordered quiet; as it grew louder all started, listening. "What is that, Ricci?" he called. "By Holy Paul, there is hope yet!"

"The turret stairs," said Ricci, "I set a watch on the roof——"

A guard rushed in, panting more with excitement than from lack of breath.

"There!" he cried, pointing back. "There! By the small postern."

"How many? Is it a feint or full strength?"

"Full strength, signor. They had been hidden in the trees and came with a rush."

"Let them come!" Faldora was almost leisurely; next instant he stiffened as a rasping crash split screeching on the quiet. "By God! the door's down! They're in! To me! to me!"

Stiffly, yet, too, with a swing and a joyousness which was reflected on his face, easing the hard sternness of his age, Faldora, his sword already drawn, ran to meet the assault. As he passed Fieravanti the sculptor, divided between joining in the counter attack or remaining to hold

the staircase in defence of Madonna Lucia, heard him mutter an anathema as his groping hand missed the dagger from his hip; then as the stamping shuffle of feet grew clearer, and a cry cut across the rising din, he turned and followed at top speed. Already the defence was giving back. In the cramped passage ways, broad as became the ancient dignity of Faldora yet narrow for the unordered mob crowding between the walls, sheer weight of numbers and the fury of Lippo's men overbore opposition. Three cool-headed men side by side could have checked the onrush, but caught unawares the defence was a rabble. Fieravanti, behind, was of little service and gave back with the crush.

What befell in that confused welter of strife? No man knew all for certain. The alarm of the guards at the postern, guards trebled for the night watches, had been lost in the splintered crash which had warned Faldora. Riven from its wooden hinges the door, catching at the lock, had swung reversewards; the rush was in and over the defenders, leaving them past all sacrament, before ever they knew there was danger: but Carlo Faldora, looking back, saw four stretched where there had been but three on guard. There would be no fifty ducats to pay—Giro of the dogs had taken his wages. How? Perhaps Faldora could have told, but with these three dead thrice over how could any ask him, Why is your blade reddened? No! No man knew for certain the full story of that day's dawning.

Slowly, but with increasing swiftness as disorder grew yet more disordered, the defence was born backward toward the great hall. Ascanio Faldora, half a head taller than most, had forced his way to the front and Fieravanti, hedged helpless in the rear of the pack, knew by the shifting shoulders that the long blade was busy; then he found himself back at the stair-foot with the day white

through the bars of the shut gate, and with a rush Lippo's men had forced their way into the hall.

Thence on there was work for all. As if by concerted plan old Faldora fell back to where Fieravanti held the staircase, and side by side, sword's room apart, they fought for a woman's life, nor was the maker of saints one jot behind the soldier in plying the soldier's trade. Seeing all go well Lippo, no coward but careful as became a man who saw the future opening roseate before him, kept in the background, urging on his men. There could be no quarter; the old lord must go the road taken by so many of his fathers: needs must that a Faldora succeed a Faldora that day; only success could justify murder.

And, presently, success came. Without a cry, without so much as a sharp-drawn breath, Ascanio Faldora reeled sideways, groped blindly at the wall and pitched forward, crumpling as he fell; but that he lay upon his breast the staining of the purple worn in honour of Signor Roverella's coming would have told the reason.

Nor did disaster end there. Left open on the flank Fieravanti, striving fiercely to cover the double space, thrust this way and that in desperation without thought to guard, took a hurt unheeded, thrust again at an opening leaving himself uncovered, and, with a point below the throat toppled backward on the steps crying, "The Madonna! God! God! the Madonna!" rolled over and lay face upwards staring.

At once a shout went up, a shout to shake the dust from the ancient corbels, and in the double triumph Lippo's men for an instant eased the pressure. But a shout answered the shout, "The Madonna! the Madonna!" and Ricci, with Nello a foot behind him, drove forward. Not alone; Fieravanti's cry had warned them there would be no quarter and this time the advantage of surprise was theirs. Back the way it had come surged the struggle. Lippo,

caught in the rear in turn, cursed, raving, as, frantically shouldering the wall, he strove to force a way to the front.

But the pressure was too heavy; little by little he was borne back. Crushed into a doorway he clung an instant to its edge and in that instant saw Carlo Faldora's pale face look out from the half darkness beyond the open door. The look, the lifted lip over the clenched teeth, was a warning. With a wrench Lippo strove to free his arm from the crush. But the very effort betrayed him; under the uplifted arm Faldora struck twice, paused staring, then turned and fled: a careful strategist, Carlo Faldora, he had a way of escape open in the rear. Slipping to his knees Lippo fell, groaning, and the backward surge of the press tramped over him: he, too, had taken his wages.

Round through that second door and by a side passage Carlo Faldora made his way in great haste to the hall, now empty of life. There he paused a moment, irresolute. What next? Faldora had gone the red way of many Faldoras, Giro was dead, Lippo had met his accident; what next? Lucia? The defence of the stairway had been hint enough; even without Fieravanti's despairing cry Carlo knew that Lucia Faldora was upon the upper floor. With one foot on the lowest step he paused again, glancing down the hall with its near end cumbered by the dead and dying: the wide door opening on to the barred gate beyond gave him a thought. Faldora lay dead at the stairfoot, he had no doubt but in the long run Lippo's men would gain the upper hand and, wanting his control, sack would follow—well, let it follow, he was Faldora of Pesaro! But Lucia? For the moment the empty camp was safest. For Lucia Faldora? No! for his own purposes, and there were horses hidden nearby in the woods. Running the length of the hall he unbarred and unlocked the gate, flinging it wide, then hastened back, paused a moment listening to the clash and din, the stamping feet, the cries, the groans, the

blent turmoil of fierce life and hurrying death, then ran upstairs.

Of the sacrilegious struggle before the altar little need be said: Faldora had a man's strength and used it like a brute. Within five minutes his footfall, burdened and careful, rang in the hollow of the staircase where Ascanio Faldora would never hear the echoes of his hope. Helpless for the moment in the folds of the scarf which had covered her from the chill of the morning the girl might sway and struggle, calling for help as she battled with all her cumbered strength, but step by step, his side eased against the balustrade for support, Faldora kept his feet, descending. At the stairfoot he halted. "See!" he called through teeth fast set in the tense strain of his effort. A jerk of the head pointed his meaning. There lay Faldora. But it was upon Fieravanti that her eyes were fastened and the cry for succour rose into a scream, "Marco! Marco!" A gasping catch in the breath choked her, but as Faldora turned towards the gateway she called, straining back against the clenching grip, "To-day, Marco, to-day—to-day," and again fought frantically against the clinch.

But as Faldora had turned a shadow fell on the threshold between the great piers of the gate. For a moment Anthony Hawk stood confused and staring, his eyes on Faldora and Faldora's on him: Lucia, straining backwards, saw nothing but Marco Fieravanti, face upward on the stairfoot and so seeing she screamed. Then Hawk understood. With an oath he ran forward, his stiff soreness lost in a fury of wild rage, ran, grappled with Faldora and grappling threw him.

Bruised by the fall, but flung clear of the two now struggling in death grips, Lucia Faldora pushed herself to her feet. "Marco!" she cried, an exceedingly bitter cry, "Marco! my Marco! Marco! Marco!" and ran back to the stairway tearing loose the scarf as she ran.

And across the gulf which had seemed the valley of the shadow Fieravanti heard. Looking up from the throat he gripped Hawk saw him stir, saw him raise himself to meet her, saw her kneel and take him to her breast: then his grip tightened.

From the hollow of the passage-way a shout arose, with Ricci's voice loud above the din, "No quarter! no quarter!" Then there was a rush of feet and silence.

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